



Sustainable Advantage

Outdoor Recreation and Community Development in Rural California

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COVID-19 acknowledgment: Our paper began and took shape prior to the pandemic. Understandably, many of the findings will be interpreted in the context of our current situation. Many of our findings are about long-range planning and capacity building for local, rural communities. The issues we address in the paper will long outlive the virus. It is our hope that rural California’s communities will weather the crisis, as they have many others, and that the paper will provide a touchstone for recovery planning and strategies for future, long-term prosperity.

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Executive Summary

In recent years, outdoor recreation has become a popular topic in rural community and economic development nationally. The trend magnifies a long-held recognition that outdoor recreation and “natural amenities” benefit rural communities both in terms of quality of life as well as economic activity. In California, the contemporary movement confounds many community leaders to define the opportunity and craft strategy at a local and regional scale. The challenge invites basic questions. Is the state paying sufficient attention to outdoor recreation impacts in rural communities? Can public and private resources catalyze community transformation in rural areas using outdoor recreation as a primary lever? To what extent can outdoor recreation strategy address the jarring economic and social disparities that plague rural California? Can outdoor recreation address basic structural gaps in rural institutional and community capacity? Why are some rural communities burdened by visitor impacts while others can’t jumpstart recreation-based economic activity?

As community development professionals with a passion for mountain biking and other outdoor recreation activities, we sought to understand the dynamics and trends of outdoor recreation and community development in rural California. This paper is the result. It synthesizes the content of interviews with 30 community leaders from the Central and Southern Sierra, Southern Cascades, and Greater Sacramento region who work in rural communities on issues related to outdoor recreation.

Interviewees told us about the factors that shape their communities, the challenges and opportunities for rural California and community development generally, and the opportunity they see for outdoor recreation to catalyze community change. The paper describes political, economic, and cultural dynamics that present the circumstances and context in which outdoor recreation community development takes shape. On the whole, the interviewees regard the opportunity of outdoor recreation as a special comparative advantage with which rural California can capture population, catalyze business development, diversify local economies, repair and create infrastructure, protect open spaces, and steward the environment. The paper synthesizes and interprets collective messages from the interviews.

We intend for the paper to offer insight into the challenges and opportunities that await rural California with additional investment in and community development around outdoor recreation initiatives and projects. We also intend for the paper to serve as a platform for advocacy, to garner funding, and to affect policy change that enables rural California to build capacity and make community investments in outdoor recreation efforts that will lead to overall community benefits.

The paper resulted in the following key findings, for which we offer recommendations in the final section of the report:

- Among practitioners, outdoor recreation definitions are inconsistent; complicating the ability of advocates and potential allies to align interests, spearhead new initiatives, and track impacts.
- Partnerships and coalitions between local stakeholders and state and federal agencies are instrumental for effective governance and community development. However, limited capacity at all levels and generally weak or absent regional planning systems impedes progress.
- Community catalysts play a key role in driving community transformation; these catalysts are agents of culture shifts and represent the vanguard for the future of rural California.

- Shared goals, visioning, and long-range planning at all levels of government and among local community stakeholders are essential for rural communities to benefit from their outdoor recreation advantage.
- Metropolitan California has an outsized influence on rural California, yielding positive and negative consequences for the regions. While tourism and business growth brings economic opportunity, heavy demand strains community and natural resources.
- Rural communities cannot thrive on hospitality and tourism alone. Pivoting to a more diverse economy will require both a culture that embraces change as well as a plan for guiding and managing growth. This will require a concerted effort between state leaders and local stakeholders to build diverse economies, protect open space and public lands, and elevate local community character and identity.

Introduction and Methodology

Purpose: Why rural California and outdoor recreation

Over the last ten years, outdoor recreation has gained popularity and is emerging as a catalyst for community and economic development. To better understand the dynamics and trends of outdoor recreation and community development in rural California, this paper synthesizes content of interviews with 30 community leaders who work on and in rural communities and outdoor recreation issues in California. Interviewees told us about the factors that shape their communities, the challenges and opportunities for rural California and community development generally, and the opportunity they see for outdoor recreation to catalyze community change.

Rural communities, particularly in the western United States, have a distinct advantage compared to their urban counterparts due to their proximity to desirable natural amenities such as mountains, rivers and forestland. The word, “advantage” has a special meaning in community and economic development. It refers to local and regional geographies and economies that attract people and businesses based on special characteristics of places. The advantages are comparative (or competitive) because certain features make certain places more attractive than others. Consequently, some places draw and cultivate resources, people, and business activity that might have gone elsewhere. This paper is about the characteristics, challenges, and opportunities that can further support rural California’s communities to realize their advantages based in outdoor recreation.

The inspiration for this project came from our conversations and reflections during trips mountain biking, climbing, skiing, backpacking (bikepacking), bike touring, and attending film festivals in and out of California over many years. We are also community and economic development professionals who want to engage and make a difference in the places where we recreate. This combination of personal experience and professional expertise provided the foundation to make this research happen. Building on these interests, we devised a project that would offer a comprehensive scan of the issues and dynamics of outdoor recreation and rural community development in California. We wanted to understand the context and challenges faced by rural communities in California and the opportunities that outdoor recreation presents for economic and community development at a local and regional scale.

With this research, we don’t prescribe specific solutions or tactics since we learned that each community’s issues are unique. Nor do we pretend that our project (which lasted about a year) can trump the decades of experience that our interviewees have, or the vast experience of our readers or community members. Instead, we hope that this research reflects the experiences of the interviewees as a perspective on rural California community needs and the benefits outdoor recreation can provide. The paper is intended as a synthesis to offer ideas that can be translated into appropriate action for practitioners--both as a reference for new considerations for programs and a cited work for advocacy campaigns. We also hope that the paper can inform policymakers at the state and regional level about the opportunity to leverage outdoor recreation for a cascade of community benefits to improve the economic, social, and environmental conditions of rural California.

The paper’s contents are somewhat surprising to us given what we initially considered as the project’s purpose - to create a template and toolkit for policy and finance mechanisms that could catalyze outdoor

recreation economic activity in rural communities. However, where we ended up couldn't be further from where we started.

We learned through our interviews that outdoor recreation has a much broader impact on rural communities than solely as an economic driver. Our paper is not just about how to attract gear and apparel manufacturing into a small town near recreation assets. It is not about how to set up a destination strategy and marketing plan for promoting outdoor recreation activities. Nor is the paper about developing trails, protecting rivers, or developing any other amenities that would yield high quality-of-life indicator scores. Interviewees raised all of these prospects as key approaches for community development. But above all we learned that no single initiative can, nor should, drive community change.

Instead, using outdoor recreation as a lens, interviewees emphasized the interplay of social, political, institutional, and community factors that form the basis for all development activity to take place or lie dormant. Local and external governance capacity and support plays a major role. So does community pride, identity, and culture. So does the presence or absence of community engagement capacity and planning strategies. So does the condition of existing infrastructure and the built environment. So do local leaders and grassroots organizations.

The communities represented in the interviews possess unending and diverse natural and human assets. However they also face challenges that are varied, numerous, and nothing new. We learned about historic economic and cultural transformations and environmental threats. Many rural places are also hindered by long-standing social, political, and institutional norms that stifle new ideas. The most successful communities often suffer from decades of poor planning and coordination. Ultimately, we learned that many communities have struggled and survived with a combination of resilience, grit, hard work, civic and environmental pride, and an ethos of personal freedom.

We learned from our interviewees that community character, culture, and identity hold the most promise for driving long-term, sustained, and large-scale community impacts. They told us about existing successes and aspirations for outdoor recreation to facilitate these impacts. The interviewees understood outdoor recreation community development as a set of values that can be used at community scale to galvanize disparate groups around shared goals.

We interpret these messages in the findings and recommendations: Outdoor recreation can and should serve as a broad-based community mindset, harnessing existing community pride and identity, around which community development strategies can take shape. Outdoor recreation development strategies hold promise to preserve community character and history, to protect natural resources and amenities, and to drive community and economic change and prosperity.

These messages led us to a powerful takeaway. Outdoor recreation presents a tangible and immediate regional advantage for rural California. While challenges remain to develop resilient rural communities using outdoor recreation, these same communities are well positioned to steward their natural assets in order to expand organizational and institutional capacity, diversify their economies, and overhaul and build key physical infrastructure. Statewide issues around population growth, transportation, forest health and management and water quality and availability encourage lawmakers and other state-level stakeholders to take a fresh look at rural communities that have long suffered from benign neglect. It will

take a sustained, intentional process over many years with policies and investments to realize the benefits of economic and community development to nurture positive change.

Intended audience

There are two main audiences for this paper: practitioners and policymakers. These groups are essential to create the structure in which development can happen and to take action and implement community projects. This paper provides background for the circumstances and conditions for such development, and calls on state leaders to take outdoor recreation seriously as an organizing framework for community development.

1. Practitioners (catalysts): intermediaries, advocacy groups, community and business leaders who are working in these communities to create and implement programs and initiatives
2. Policymakers (enablers): government officials who are crafting policies, awarding funding, and providing technical support around planning and coordination for community development

Methodology

We conducted one-hour executive and stakeholder interviews with 30 leaders from the Central and Northern Sierra, Southern Cascades, and Greater Sacramento regions. The interview guide used a series of open-ended questions to gather qualitative information about the interviewees' professional experience in rural communities. The goal of the guide was to allow interviewees to express their unique perspective about the influences that shape rural development and to solicit their thoughts about the impact that outdoor recreation could have in their communities.

We used the guide to frame conversations, but did not maintain a strict adherence to asking each question verbatim. We intentionally designed the questions to allow for the researchers and interviewees to expand on key topics. Our richest insights often came from these parts of our dialogue.

We sent the guide to the interviewees in advance of the interview, and recorded the interviews for transcription. The pull quotes throughout the paper are the result. The interview guide includes the following topics:

- Rural economic challenges and strategies
- Economic diversification
- Definition of the interviewee's region
- Outdoor recreation definitions, projects, and goals
- Typical project partners and underutilized stakeholders
- Towns and organizations for case studies
- Key policies and toolkits
- Best practices for improving rural economic conditions with outdoor recreation
- Suggestions of other resources and reports

The full interview guide is available as [Appendix A](#).

We performed a detailed textual analysis of the transcripts to synthesize key themes and messages, which formed the basis of the paper’s outline. From there, additional textual analysis allowed us to refine our understanding and to generate pull quotes that best illustrated the findings.

Many hours of conversations (as well as the writing process) informed our final product.

About the interviewees

We identified interviewees from conferences, our existing community partnerships, and referrals during the interviews. We sought geographic distribution as well as representation from community development and outdoor recreation stakeholders at the federal, state, regional, and local levels. We also sought diversity between the public and private sectors, including business and nonprofits.

The interviewees live and work in several regions of the Sierra Nevada, the Southern Cascades, and the Greater Sacramento region. We have interviewees from the Lake Tahoe region, Mammoth Lakes, Mount Shasta and Siskiyou County, Chico, and Sacramento. A few of the interviewees live out of state, but offer technical assistance relevant to the California context. We did not cover Southern California, Coastal California, or the San Francisco Bay Area.

The table below displays a summary of the organization types represented in the interviews.

A list of the interviewees and their organizations can be found in [Appendix B](#).

Federal	State	Regional and local
U.S. Forest Service	Industry advocacy group	Regional leadership organization
U.S. Department of Agriculture	Policy advocacy organization	Economic development organization
Recreation advocacy		Economics consulting
		Land trust
		Metropolitan Planning Organization
		Destination Marketing Organization
		Regional planning organization
		Resource conservation district

One shortcoming of our research is the low relative representation from federal and state government offices that work on rural issues. We also did not have many elected officials. We did not make a conscious choice to exclude these voices. Instead, this happened as a result of our desire to learn directly from partners with “boots on the ground” in rural communities.

We also acknowledge bias in the interviews toward pro-growth and pro-outdoor recreation positions. With a couple of exceptions, the people we interviewed are generally supportive of the idea of doing community development using outdoor recreation as a strategy. Of the 30 interviewees, no interviewee opposed using outdoor recreation to enhance local and regional rural communities.

Organization of the paper

The paper is divided into three sections: Community Context, Key Themes, and Findings and Recommendations.

In *Community Context*, we offer working definitions of “outdoor recreation” and “rural.” We synthesized interviewee responses to craft these definitions. We also present an overview of the partners and stakeholders that interviewees mentioned in our conversations. The result offers an inventory of key actors within these communities and reveals the complexity of initiating and making progress on projects in rural California. We also hope the inventory will reveal opportunities to leverage and involve new partners in local and regional projects.

In this section we also discuss interviewee responses to regional definitions and dynamics. We were especially interested in understanding dynamics and challenges for regional governance—how politics and the economy works within local and regional context and vis-a-vis external forces. We describe their responses here.

We read dozens of articles and reports to inform our understanding of economic and community development in rural places. Much of the literature covers economic and other community benefits owed to the proximity of rural places to public lands, outdoor recreation, and other natural resource amenities. A list of reviewed literature is available in [Appendix C](#).

The next section, *Key Themes*, highlights the most often and clearly cited issues that emerged in the interviews. Interviewees referenced these themes through various examples and from different perspectives. Throughout the body of the paper, we include pull quotes from the interviews that exemplify the big ideas we hope to convey. These themes are broadly arranged to reflect issues that represent existing challenges and conditions, and those that represent future visions and opportunities for strategic planning.

In *Findings and Recommendations*, we connect the dots between the key themes to offer actionable next steps for practitioners and policymakers. We learned that there are many areas that would be well served by further research. While rural areas face major issues and challenges, there are also opportunities and assets that they can use to their advantage. We offer suggestions about a few focus areas and a means for enacting change that could help communities achieve their long-term goals.

What we didn't cover

Several issues emerged in the interviews that we did not address in the paper. We chose to leave out these issues due to their specificity and complexity. These topics warrant investigations in their own right, which was outside the scope of this research.

Housing came up numerous times throughout the interviews. The most well developed outdoor recreation communities, and small towns with burgeoning recreation activities, experience housing shortages for permanent residents due to high demand for vacation homes, the short-term rental markets, and general development challenges. We cite housing generally in the paper as an impacted area, but do not address solutions or discuss the issue in detail.

Broadband access presents another basic challenge for much of rural California. Again, the issue came up often in the interviews, but we did not address it directly in the paper.

Agritourism offers a close analog to outdoor recreation for rural community development for several reasons. Agritourism presents a key partnership opportunity for outdoor recreation since many farmers and ranchers offer recreation activities alongside agricultural services and experiences. The University of California, Cooperative Extension and other organizations have technical assistance programs that offer assistance in designing and managing outdoor recreation experiences within agritourism. Again, we decided that the topic merits further investigation, but did not fit into the scope of our paper.

Finally, our interview guide asked interviewees directly for their perspective on the movement for states to adopt Offices of Outdoor Recreation at a senior, state leadership level. Many states in the western United States have such offices. California has tried unsuccessfully several times to pass legislation for an office. Most interviewees are supportive of the effort, but it fell outside the scope of the paper.

About us

We are not policy experts or academics. We are working community and economic development practitioners who are passionate about outdoor recreation and protecting the places where we recreate. We are also outsiders in many regards. Even though we have both spent a lifetime recreating and competing outside in rural communities, we are city dwellers. We were trained at urban schools. We work in urban communities. With that said, we think that partnerships between urban and rural California will be vital as we move into the middle of the 21st Century.

You can view our bios in [Appendix D](#).

Community Context

Definitions and considerations

There is no single definition of either “rural” or “outdoor recreation”. This creates a significant hurdle for establishing need, garnering support, and convening an audience of stakeholders to share practices and allocate resources to manage development effectively. Policy and funding prerogatives will be stymied until rural and outdoor recreation stakeholders develop shared definitions.

Outdoor recreation

More research is needed to understand how policymakers and practitioners define and track outdoor recreation. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service has [a definition of recreation counties](#). The [Bureau of Economic Analysis](#) developed a method to measure national and state economic impacts from outdoor recreation, but interviewees note that there are few local impact studies on outdoor recreation. In practice, interviewees cited diffuse and catchall descriptions of the term, presenting a challenge for practitioners to initiate development projects and communicate value to policymakers and other stakeholders.

Interviewees described outdoor recreation in broad terms that included multiple activities. No interviewee offered a specific, comprehensive definition, nor were their descriptions uniform or standard. However, a few commonalities emerged.

Descriptions generally refer to sporting and non-sporting physical activities outside. A few mentioned the measures put forward from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Accounts and the [impact analysis](#) from the Outdoor Industry Association, but their descriptions did not include specific mentions of the industries and activities included in those counts. The impact analysis from the Outdoor Industry Association was the most frequently cited reference. The references were more sound bite impact numbers than they were descriptive definitions.

Interviewees frequently use the term “natural resource amenities,” or a similar phrase like “natural environment” interchangeably with “outdoor recreation.”

Here are a few examples of interviewees’ description of outdoor recreation activity when we asked them for a definition. The quotes illustrate the range of ways people define and describe outdoor recreation.

“Any economic activity related to recreation...the primary, secondary, tertiary impacts” (Manager, regional organization)

Interviewees mentioned the following activities when describing outdoor recreation activity.

- Soccer
- Hunting
- OHV
- Skiing
- Mountain biking
- Birding
- Sightseeing
- Fishing
- Nature walks
- Boating
- Kayaking
- Strolls on trails

“Everything we do around here is based on recreation.... That means a million things to a million people.... Soft recreation...[experience] fall colors...take a little walk in the woods.” (Executive, business group)

“We're doing some audio tours in each county that are centered around birding.” (Manager, business group)

“Our history might have been you had to be really willing to get out there and you know be a rugged extreme outdoor enthusiast.... [But] folks can come and have a first time experience with a waterfall.... It's easy to access, it doesn't have to be extreme.” (Manager, business group)

“One day I was coming home from...Idaho and I'd come through Burns, Oregon, and into Modoc County, and I stopped for breakfast and the place is busy, and I'm like, ‘What's going on?’ ‘It's deer hunting season.’ And I'm thinking ‘deer hunting season.’ That is not on the list of cool things in California, but it is so vitally important to the local economy of Alturas.” (Executive in a technical assistance group)

“Nobody has really quantified the economic impact of all these [recreation] assets [at the local and regional level] too, and their ability to scale.” (Manager of a technical assistance group)

Further research can inventory definitions from professional associations, industry groups, offices of outdoor recreation, and grassroots advocacy that would include recommendations to advance organizing policy by focusing efforts and measuring impact based on clear goals. Specific definitions also offer a path for interested groups to become future allies.

Rural

There are many existing definitions and concepts of rural that challenge standardization. When interviewees described rural characteristics and definitions, they referred to population density, area measured by rural land use category (forest, agriculture, public lands, marsh, etc.), nearness to public lands or a national park, and descriptions amounting to, ‘you know it when you see it.’

To some interviewees, definitions of rural often do not represent community needs or achieve coherent policy objectives. Certain rules for funding mechanisms, for example, proscribe rural counties from eligibility due to the presence of a populous town.

Beyond any strict policy or agency definition of rural places, the interviewees noted that the character and dynamics within local and regional communities are critical to supporting how they are shaped. They talked about the diversity of places in terms of broader regional dynamics, whether they are well connected to metropolitan drive markets, or draw on retirees who frequent historical vacation destinations. They also talked about diversity in terms of past economic activities and features of the landscape that gave rural places a history that shaped their communities.

One interviewee highlighted the diversity and changing character of the Sierra's regions, which poses challenges to easily characterize rural California.

“The region is really diverse between the north and the south, in terms of the types of communities that exist there. There's a lot of remnant Gold Rush communities in this area. There's a lot of remnant

ranching and grazing livestock communities in this area. And then there's a lot of, sort of an exploding sector of the region that are retirees, equity refugees from the Bay Area.” (Executive, state agency)

Another interviewee echoed the regional diversity in rural Sierra regions, but also talked about awareness and perceptions of these places from outsiders in his industry.

“I have found the notion of rural is different for different people. For example, when I talk with people in [my] industry, their reference point is rural might be Lake Tahoe or Sierra County, or Plumas County. My context of rural is Modoc County and Tehama, and these places that are way out there and get very little attention. Now, is Placer and Sierra, and Plumas rural? Yes, it is but I think people don't really have a sense of what's beyond these places.” (Executive, technical assistance group)

Partners and stakeholders

Rural California presents a complex landscape of actors and interests that defies a universal description. This complexity presents challenges for statewide and local efforts to adopt any one-size-fits-all approach to community development.

Partners and stakeholders cited in the interviews often fulfill a range of functions and duties to develop and manage recreation activities. The stakeholders we identified in the interviews presented new ideas for engaging partners in ways that previously were not tried.

Federal partners	State partners	Regional and local partners
US Forest Service	Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC)	Councils of Government (COG)
National Park Service	California State Parks	Metropolitan Transportation Organizations (MPO)
Bureau of Land Management	California Natural Resources Agency	Water districts and other special districts
National advocacy organizations	University of California Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources	County government and council
	University of California Cooperative Extension	Town government and council
	Governor’s Office of Business and Economic Development (GoBiz)	Chambers of commerce
	California State University economic development extensions	Economic development organizations
	Community colleges (various)	Destination marketing organizations (DMO)
	Private lumber companies	Local and regional recreation advocacy and service providers
	State professional and advocacy organizations	Land trusts
		Conservancies
		Private landowners (local)

Federal agencies and national organizations

The U.S. Forest Service is the most frequently cited partner for recreation projects from the federal level. Many interviewees cited general capacity challenges in the agency that stymie partnership and engagement (see capacity section below). Others, however, noted successful working relationships with a number of district-level rangers that have resulted in successful projects and programs.

This quote echoes many interviewees who regard the U.S. Forest Service as a key leader in recreation planning.

“Overall I see the land manager, the forest services is our leader. And they're [our] key partner within this and we should be looking to them for that leadership aspect but at the same time having an expectation of cooperation and communication with the community in a sense.” (Manager of a conservation group)

State agencies and other organizations

The interviewees did not identify strong relationships with state agencies, even though background research and discussions often cited those same agencies as influential in rural areas. This disconnect suggests an opportunity for local actors and recreation advocates to expand their partnerships among state-level agencies and organizations. At the same time, the finding indicates that state-level actors should be better connecting to local rural communities and recreation advocates as well. One quote illustrates the finding.

“Yeah, it's kind of a barren landscape when it comes to this stuff. There's just not that many groups [at the state level] that are focusing on rural.” (Manager, technical assistance group)

A few professional organizations, advocacy groups, and university programs provide technical assistance and legislative assistance for rural California. Community colleges are strewn throughout the state, though many noted that in spite of the massive reach, many rural communities do not have a campus nearby. Private lumber companies are among the state's largest private landowners, and have a major influence.

Regional and local agencies and organizations

Local and regional-level actors include cities and counties, chambers of commerce, destination marketing organizations (DMOs), economic development corporations, and community advocacy organizations and volunteer groups.

Distinguishing between regional and local organizations is tricky in rural places. The geographic expanse covered under rural counties practically makes them regional entities. Other organizations, such as chambers of commerce or economic development organizations, are similarly stretched across wide geography.

The county emerged in the interviews as the most important formal government actor to address local and regional issues in rural California. Interviewees communicated that regional governance systems are either absent or weak in rural California (see section on governance below). In places without a city possessing significant resources, the county has a lead role for state engagement, service provision, and

acting as an intermediary. As such, counties fulfill roles that regional planning organizations are responsible for in more urban areas.

Rural/metropolitan market ties

When we asked interviewees to describe the dynamics in their regions, they communicated key themes and trends regarding the impact and influence of outdoor recreation on rural community development. They described how major metropolitan regions play an unmistakable role in shaping the character of the rural parts of the state. They also stated that metropolitan market ties are critical for rural areas to develop outdoor recreation community benefits and economic opportunities.

Interviewees talked about the economic and geographic history of the state. The regional economic geography may currently represent a reversal from the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century. Then, the extraction economy fueled the development of some of the major cities in California. Much of that extraction activity occurred in rural areas through logging and mining, with the resources shipped to build urban areas. Now, the metropole, bursting at the seams in Los Angeles and the Bay Area, could drive development and investment in rural California in the coming decades.

Some areas and groups have realized economic and other benefits from building recreation assets and promoting these assets and the region with large events. The assets and promotion activities have led to increased visitation for personal trips, but also the overall desirability of the places, people investing in vacation properties, or moving to the area full time.

“We generate federal, state, local grants to build new trails, and then we hold events to showcase those trails. And by doing these events on an annual basis, we introduce thousands of people to this market. And the benefit of that is that ...we generate a lot of trips to the market, in preparation for these [events], people come back for vacation, and the result has been generally increasing home values in a place that was all but forgotten, and a heck of a lot of new trail.” (Executive of an advocacy group)

Looking to the future, the interviewees describe how connectivity to metropolitan regions represents an unmistakable advantage for communities looking to grow their economies. Connectivity can take many forms, both tangible such as via roads and airports and digital as with remote work. Interviewees describe rural California’s reliance on drive markets and remote work for economic activity. They also project continued connectivity to open new tourism markets and a remote workforce in rural parts of the state.

Rural vacation destinations and drive markets fuel new resident transfers over generations. We heard several examples of such phenomena in the interviews. In a few cases, golf courses laid the groundwork for future recreation and destination development. Ultimately, continued demand to spend time in vacation destinations catalyzed a diverse economy beyond tourism and attracted permanent residents.

Several interview quotes illustrate the significance of rural-metropolitan ties.

“People that walk in our office, and say, ‘Hey, I’ve been coming here for 10, 20, 30 years, or my parents even did. And now I want to figure out a way to live here. And I bring my business here. I bring my own job. I actually work remotely somewhere else.’” (Executive of a business group)

“If you want to talk about markets, you're really talking about three core markets. You're talking about the Greater Bay Area, you're talking about Sacramento, and then you're talking, to a larger extent, LA, that whole LA-San Diego Corridor area. And so access is absolutely critical, and we have pretty good access in the state, but many of these rural areas have a hurdle, and that is they're just more distant which takes up more time which minimizes the volume of people that can visit. And that can work in some instances, because you don't want these places to be overrun, but you want them to have a fighting chance.” (Executive of a technical assistance group)

Many forecast a trend of people moving to rural areas for the quality of life amenities, enabled by future broadband availability to telecommute to distant markets. We address this emerging opportunity theme in the section below on economic diversification.

“And the relationship now with the intervention of transportation and technology is very different, and it's like you're getting these clusters of innovation-based economies and rural regions that are tied to urban centers, like we were talking about Tahoe being tied to the Bay Area innovation cluster and the Eastside being to the Southern California, Los Angeles cluster, that the relationship between urban and rural prosperity has not been clearly fleshed out. And then within all of these regional economic development initiatives is the relationship between recreation economy and economic development has not been fleshed out. It's going to be interesting.” (Executive of a business group)

Political dynamics and regional governance in rural California

The interviewees described a historic and present situation of rural California as under-represented in Sacramento and neglected from state-level politics and business interests. These broad-based issues have had an impact on the ability to create effective partnerships for outdoor recreation projects in rural places.

One interviewee talked about challenges for securing state and federal funding for rural parts of California. The quote is representative of many interviews.

“I think rural regions...are always left behind when it comes to funding from the state, that's first and foremost. So I think state and federal grants that promote recreational economies and expanding rural regions in that way, would be absolutely beneficial and useful and helpful.” (Executive of a regional group)

Several interviewees addressed challenges in getting private investment to rural California, especially given the dominance of economic engines in metropolitan regions in the state.

“There's a lot of people talking about rural, it's become a very important political topic, but at the end of the day, it's falling under this rule, which is the urban areas are getting 80% of the action and the rurals are getting 20% and it's because there's very little population out there.” (Manager of a technical assistance program)

One interviewee said that a few parts of rural California typically receive state funding for environmental and climate change funds. The quote points to the challenges that can arise with considerations around rural definitions and eligibility for state funding, but also perceptions around uneven levels of state representation in rural California.

“I think there's a lot of attention, rightfully so, there's a lot of attention on the state of low income communities that have a lot of air pollution, the Inland Empire, Riverside, Fresno, Stockton, but those are still ...very urban areas, and communities in the Sierra and far northern California really are completely left out of everything.” (Manager, regional organization)

Regional governance also represents a significant challenge for rural community development in California generally, and outdoor recreation development specifically, according to the interviewees. Several interviewees described weak regional governance or lack of a formal regional entity for many of the communities they support such as a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), or Council of Governments (COG). The issues they described include recreation projects and market development related to recreation (e.g. tourism destination development or business attraction).

Reduced governance capacity presents a legal and practical barrier for communities in rural California to qualify for certain programs that require regional strategies, projects, and partners that span jurisdictional boundaries. Many issues critical to rural California require watershed and landscape-scale engagement planning to be eligible for funding. According to a few interviewees, even if an eligible legal entity is identified, collaborative planning in a large regional geography takes time and energy that may or may not be available. In the absence of these ongoing planning efforts, much of rural California is left behind.

“It definitely looks better to the state and the feds if you have collaborative process, collective governance, and universally-adopted desired strategies and outcomes.... The governance infrastructure isn't in place for [our region] to collaborate at [a landscape level]. So every time you want to collaborate at that level you have to either create some kind of a memorandum of understanding relationship to do it, that doesn't actually have any teeth, because it has no governance powers. Or you have to convince an existing subregional institutional governance authority, like a [joint powers authority (JPA)] to take on that issue. And since most JPAs are formed around single issues that's a really hard thing to do. So that's a barrier in rural regions that they don't have regional governance institutions or mechanisms to address regional problems.... And to address regional issues like housing and large landscape recreation planning, you're going to need to come up with governance mechanisms or entities that can do that.” (Executive of a business group)

Interviewees noted that established groups with significant experience and a track record of leading successful projects exist. These organizations still confront capacity challenges and resource barriers that hinder their ability to achieve the level of planning and coordination needed to move initiatives forward. One interviewee noted how regional governance issues affected recreation issues, many of which cover regional geographies.

“Groups like us and [a regional group and a business group] are good at [bringing stakeholders] together, but we connect across borders, across jurisdictions.... And recreation doesn't stop at jurisdiction boundaries either, right? Like any bike path, or bike trail or especially a mountain bike trail in the forest is going to go across multiple jurisdictions.... So I feel like an area that could use more support...to allow for organizations like us and other similar to us to do that cross collaboration, so that the recreation additions or expansion plans are done in a collaborative and thoughtful way.” (Executive from a regional group)

Another interviewee described filling a regional coordination gap by bringing together stakeholders who typically are not able to collaborate. These creative solutions were referenced often by interviewees as examples of what must happen in their communities for projects to get done.

“And I've seen collaboratives work well, and some work not so well, especially when you're dealing with larger landscapes, and maybe you've got a dozen different gateway communities that are not used to being in the same room together, it kinda gets a little interesting. And so, that's where our organization is keying into, what that process may look like, and what's appropriate for this area, what can we steal in terms of great ideas from other communities, like [a community in Eastern California]. . . how can we repurpose that for the landscape that...to create something that is going to prepare us for [a recreation] planning opportunity.” (Executive of an advocacy group)

Interviewees cited specific challenges, especially around economic development for outdoor recreation (business development, destination development) in the absence of regional government coordination and capacity.

“I would love and have been actively [developing] an office of economic development that sits under [our regional council of governments] that has players from every place and does exactly what we're talking about, how do we drive economic vitality across multiple channels, not just tourism? Tourism as a component of that, but how do you drive the story across ...different communities? How do you drive your business development? How do you create a fund that allows for startups to be able to thrive here with economic support that has a view to the community?” (Executive of a business group)

Another interviewee described state-level coordination among regions for land use decisions that impact recreation opportunities that impact economic development.

“There is no government agency or entity right now that is in Sacramento that is talking to the different land managers, whether it's the folks on a federal level, BLM, Forest Service, rural communities as far as economic development.” (Manager of a business group)

Key Themes

A number of key themes emerged throughout the course of our interviews. These themes represent the salient issues affecting rural communities, and represent enabling factors for future community and economic development. These themes span a breadth of topics, however they are interrelated in the way that they play out in society. Any outdoor recreation program or initiative must incorporate the lessons taught by these themes in order to have a chance at success.

Capacity challenges for local community and grassroots coordination

Capacity presents a challenge for rural California and impacts outdoor recreation, among other facets of economic and community development. Governmental agencies and organizations are understaffed or underskilled, which can challenge coordination efforts. Staffing capacity, where present, is overburdened with keeping basic community functions like policing and social services running.

Interviewees noted the lack of specific capacity to perform standard functions that would target recreation project development and coordination for infrastructure, destination marketing, and economic development.

“I think a lot of the challenges that those [rural] communities have is its capacity. Most of these rural jurisdictions, their planning department is two people. They don't have the staff with the expertise, they don't have a separate recreation planner, which is difficult.... The town of Mammoth Lakes hired a trails coordinator for the town, which is huge.” (Manager in a business group)

“I don't think that any single organization or single agency is equipped well, certainly not in this area, to guide that process and self-facilitate it.... [This is a] nightmare for public agencies. You've got no coordination and no staff. All volunteer boards.... a great Christmas present for us I think would be like a county coordinator of outdoor recreation and trails, somebody like that, that can work with all the different stakeholders.” (Executive in an advocacy organization)

Other, broader efforts, like visioning, long-range planning, and initiative development pose even greater challenges in the absence of local staff capacity. One interviewee summed up the responses of many in describing the kind of strategic visioning that would be required for officials and residents to identify assets for destination development. The interviewee also noted that expertise and resources to act on creating those priorities is also typically absent.

“These are [rural California] communities that, they just don't have [destination development strategy]. They barely have a city manager.... A lot of them even contract out that stuff, so.... They get stuff done with consultants and contractors.... I think that that's probably one of the key impediments is they don't know how to put themselves on the map.... they're not marketed because they don't know what they have.... The starting point is them even figuring out what they have, and if they do have something, they're not good at marketing that, and that is probably a function of just lack of experience doing that or lack of a budget or staff to do it. So they're just very resource-poor, I think, when it comes to putting time and effort and personnel into economic development.” (Manager of a technical assistance group)

One interviewee discussed the challenges for local communities to promote themselves in spite of the wealth of natural resource amenities they possess.

“[Rural communities in Far Northern California] don't really have an infrastructure for tourism promotion. They may have some assets, they may have a National Forest, they may have deer hunting season...but they often don't have a very built infrastructure for tourism promotion.” (Executive in a technical assistance provider)

Most interviewees said that grassroots community organizing efforts are among the most important elements to planning and development for outdoor recreation projects and initiatives. Engaging community members and stakeholders in visioning sessions, and asking them to identify and prioritize projects are the fundamentals of recreation project development. One example of grassroots capacity impacts is working with the forest service for trail building. Interviewees emphasized the value of beginning with a coordinated effort informed by broad community engagement. This approach helped to clarify priorities and streamline approvals, and also met emerging federal guidelines that require such comprehensive engagement. But like local government and regional governance, grassroots organizing faces capacity challenges to perform this coordination work in rural communities.

“The challenge on the Forest Service side is that [they] don't have capacity to create partnerships... [They have] a skeleton crew of people trying to manage millions of acres of land and so, being responsive to communities and community partnership is extremely difficult for [them] to manage, particularly, when we have the catastrophic wildfires in California that are always going to be a higher priority and a lot of [forest service] staff who do know trails, end up supporting the work of the fire militia.” (Manager in a federal agency)

On the community side, several interviewees noted capacity challenges to engage community members and stakeholders to create a vision and synthesize a set of priorities for forest service travel planning efforts.

“So, the invitation is there, but unless you've kinda got that grassroots collaborative happening that can take maximum advantage of that party invitation, then nothing is going to come out of it... that is the challenge, is creating a collaborative effort and getting people kind of speaking the same language around outdoor recreation so that it can influence [recreation] planning at a larger level.” (Executive in an advocacy organization)

When communities are engaged, and coordination capacity connects community engagement and planning with federal or state agency processes, successful projects and partnerships result. One interviewee who works frequently with the forest service on recreation planning and projects described scenarios and outcomes with well-engaged and coordinated communities, and efforts that are less organized.

“The collaborative process has been great, that we kinda have going and the Forest Service has been really engaging of the public and you're seeing within this happened within the last two years, and there's been a big shift on kind of perceptions and communications whereas it, if the local forest doesn't really have a good working relationship and a collaborative effort with the community then you see I think the animosity grow, you see misinformation you see those other elements come into

play, that just kinda create more issues and more divisiveness between the land manager and the public. So on a local level, those are so critical.” (Manager in a conservation organization)

Community culture

We asked the interviewees to describe their concept or view of successful economic development that would lead to more equitable, prosperous economies. We asked them also to describe the major challenges that typically face rural communities.

In response to these questions, many interviewees described culture as the number one challenge facing rural communities. Cultural challenges, they said, come in various shapes. One described an endemic poverty mentality. Several described quick dismissals of new ideas and projects as typical responses from community members and local officials. Several described a general suspicion of outsiders who provide technical assistance or field new project or partnership proposals. One described frequent contradictions from local officials who claim to want development, but who lack either the capacity or will to follow through. Some describe the state and federal agencies working in rural California as having entrenched, slow moving bureaucracies that resist change, new ideas, and new partners.

The quotes below illustrate these points.

“The biggest challenge, in my eyes, is a poverty mentality. So in the academic literature on poverty, there's this thing that happens in your head that the more you have the culture of being poor around you, the more convinced you are that you can never be anything but, so you stop trying.... but in my humble opinion it is overcoming the poverty mentality or the, ‘We can't do it.’ mentality, and instilling a, ‘We can do it.’ mentality is the single most important thing, and that's the biggest roadblock to overcome.” (Executive of a business group)

“The [forest service and state parks can be] so slow to change and adapt. And just look at state parks and the reservation system was antiquated for eons. And so, the philosophies of those organizations and those departments have been very slow to adapt and I think that, at certain points, that has hindered projects. And in other areas, some of these forest supervisors have been really helpful and they adapt.” (Executive in a technical assistance organization)

The interviewees cited a familiar set of reasons for the mindset they describe. Rural economies have been in decline for decades as resource extraction economies in transition. These places have fallen victim to decades of disinvestment and environmental hazards. Residents moved to rural areas to escape crowded areas overburdened with regulations and taxes. The sorts of people who live in these places have a default anti-development, anti-change mentality. General conservatism in these places is commensurate with suspicion of outside interests. These explanations, true or false, represent the perceptions of several interviewees.

Some of these same interviewees also cite hopeful and optimistic cultures in local rural communities and in the federal agencies working in rural California. One described “community preparedness” as rural communities that have cultures receptive to new ideas that offer a supportive environment for discussion and proposals.

“I think of a continuum almost of community preparedness.... There are a lot of communities, especially small rural communities are like, ‘it’s going to be the same as it ever was.’ Somebody comes up [with] an idea and everybody shoots it down, it’s yeah, we tried that, or ‘That’s a dumb idea that’ll never happen, that’ll never work here.’ To the other opposite end of the spectrum of where somebody comes with an idea, and they’re like, ‘Yeah how can we help make that person successful, and rally behind it?’ (Executive of a business group)

Another described an attitude shift that could encourage new ideas.

“It could be very simply, ‘you know what, bring us your ideas and we’ll help you figure them out.’ Or it could be things like, ‘Hey, you know what, we’ve built a tool kit here, or we have an arrangement with this consulting group and they’ll help you develop a message, or help you with your business idea.... And I think that’s no different whether you’re sitting in Plumas County, Sierra County, or Modoc County, you’ve gotta have somebody, a City Manager, a Economic Development Officer, somewhere in that government infrastructure, there’s gotta be somebody who says, ‘You know what, bring those ideas forward.’ But most county governments are not set up that way. Most county governments are set up to oppose things.” (Executive of a technical assistance group)

Community catalysts and creative space for development

Community catalysts – people who rally participants behind ideas, projects, and organizations – are key to grassroots community organizing efforts. The interviewees described community catalysts as people who affect change by organizing community members and stakeholders to craft visions and identify priorities. They are elected officials, activist residents, business owners, investors, or heads of nonprofit advocacy groups.

They are leaders, but they do not thrive on their own power, interviewees noted. They are the product of communities that enable creative, new ideas, and that provide supportive funding, resources, and collaborative relationships. In early stages of development, communities run the risk of squandering momentum and opportunities that catalysts present if they are not fostered and supported. Initially, they are often “one-person bands” that can get burned out if they don’t have support.

The interviewees articulate a community catalyst formula for various applications including entrepreneurship, trail development, and other dynamic social and political partnerships and projects for outdoor recreation and community development.

One interviewee cited a prominent leader in the outdoor recreation movement as an example of a community catalyst. Again, the catalyst, the interviewee notes, can be a major driving force, but local officials and state funders need to support the efforts of the catalyst and the community group he or she organizes.

“I think what happens is somebody in the community who’s a leader and is either savvy enough and charismatic enough to encourage the rest of the people in their community, comes up with an idea. They advance that idea, and it leads to some sort of strategy. Think John Wentworth at [Mammoth Lakes Trails and Public Access Foundation].... That burgeons into some kind of a project. They drag everyone along, kicking and screaming at first, and then they love it. And then the biggest challenge for most local communities is to get the state and the feds to actually get involved, take it seriously,

and begin to provide support and resources. So I would love to say that government is the solution, but usually if the community doesn't come together through some sort of collaborative effort to advance a really good idea that is at least mostly baked, government doesn't really engage.”
(Executive in a regional group)

Interviewees described the catalysts also for single recreation businesses and for economic development efforts. In the case cited below, the interviewee discusses how a community leader is the glue holding together a unique entrepreneurial asset, a coworking space in a small town. But as with the description above, in the absence of a supportive environment, the community puts the asset and momentum at risk.

“Getting more of that innovators, entrepreneurial thinking happening within the community requires a catalyst. Some cohesive reason for people to come together requires a champion to really keep poking it and making those connections. And it requires both some public and some private desire to see it happen. I think you need community leaders, whether they're appointed or elected in town government, as well as community leaders that are [often] some of the financial backers or some of the networkers in these communities to get together and steward this idea forward. If you don't, you end up with what feels like a one-man band sometimes trying to play a full concert and they just give up because it gets tiring.” (Executive in a business group)

The potential for supporting community catalysts and their efforts can be massive from an outdoor recreation development standpoint. This interviewee describes scenarios in which passionate activists generated major assets by galvanizing grassroots efforts.

“You need enablers to allow people in the community to express their own creativity when it comes to these things. And then, you can get support from more traditional organizations, or agencies, but...you need somebody who's got passion for something. They want to protect a part of a river and all of a sudden that becomes one of the finest fly fishing runs in the world, or there's a group of mountain bikers that get together and they find these trails, or whatever it is... but you have to have an enabling mindset and that I think can be problematic, particularly at the state level.” (Executive from a technical assistance group)

Grassroots community engagement, entrepreneurship activity, and community catalysts need open space and supportive environments and relationships to thrive and have ideas and projects come forward. No interviewees described top-down approaches where local or state agencies directed project implementation or came in with a prescribed set of guidelines that led to successful projects. On the contrary, they described government and technical assistance providers as providing supportive assistance, funding, tools, and other resources to enable emerging community and business activity to bubble to the surface.

The interviewee below had a unique, but representative, assertion on creativity as a key development criterion.

“I have come to believe, in my experience, that creativity is the most important asset a community can have. And creativity has to just be given a chance to flourish. I have told every city manager that shows up in [our region] to...just lay the canvas out and this community will fill it in. Don't try and over-engineer everything. Give them the open space and they'll figure out how to deal with it.”
(Executive in a technical assistance group)

Whether business or community or policy development, some space needs to be available for community and business leaders to interact in an informal, creative environment where emerging ideas can take shape that lead to projects, partnerships, organizations, and businesses. Several interviewees talked about this especially in reference to entrepreneurship. One leader of a business group described a version of supportive government that allowed space for emerging business activity.

*"I want [government] to do what [it does] well...keep doing it. I will talk about it, but I want you to let me do what I do well, and talk about it and share it and support it. But if you try to put together one giant plan, you lose the benefit of what can emerge from a network if you get out of the way."
(Executive of a business group)*

Successful economic development and community partnerships thrive in spaces that allow for this creativity to happen. One interviewee who leads a public-private partnership business group described supporting outdoor recreation businesses by setting up an informal monthly gathering where entrepreneurs can interact informally in a monthly meeting.

"[A few regional outdoor recreation businesses] said, 'Gosh, we can learn so much from each other on whether it's distribution or marketing or whatever it was if we'd get together more on a regular basis.' And that started happening. We provide the beer and pizza.... And there's been a lot of companies form from people meeting at those things saying, 'Yeah, I've always wanted to do this.' Or, 'you've got that technology. Let's start a company.... it's a lot of peer problem-solving, I think that's happening informally, when people get together for these meetings, or maybe it's... those introductions are happening, and it's happening offline." (Executive of a business group)

Need for custom tailored strategies and solutions

The interview project we undertook started out with an assumption that interviewees largely discredited. We assumed that our project would inventory a common set of tools and best practices that we could catalog and diagram according to what people told us worked best. This couldn't be further from what we learned.

Though some interviewees cite a need for inter-regional collaboration, and a desire to share practices with colleagues, they almost universally said templates and toolkits are insufficient for inciting community transformations. Moreover, they told us that top-down designed approaches generally don't work. The previous sections on community catalysts and informal, supportive spaces for development echo the finding.

One quote we keep coming back to is a line that fundamentally goes counter to the notion of cookie-cutter development. This business leader did acknowledge that intentional development effort can yield results, but at least as often development success "just kind of happened." To our framing of the project in terms of templates and toolkits, this interviewee was highly skeptical, and said the following:

"When you've seen one community, you've seen one community." (Executive of a business group)

In the context of the interview, the quote means that the economic and cultural conditions, history, and circumstances of every community will buck a prescriptive formula every time. You can't engineer community and economic transformation.

The quote below from another interviewee below goes further. It is not just the conditions and circumstances that yield the future of communities, but the communities themselves that need to be the conduits of change and development.

“In our experience, I think it's very rare that an outside entity steps in, sees an opportunity, and gets the locals excited about it. I think it's usually something that starts at the grassroots level where it's the people who believe they would benefit from the project if it were completed or benefit from the change if it were made that usually they become the enthusiastic driving based, oftentimes volunteer-based organizations... it seems like are the first ones to see the potential. And then, it works its way up from there because, frankly, most municipal governments do want to support what their constituent base is really, really excited about, because they obviously want to be re-elected. So, I think often... it starts really at that grassroots level in a very organic and disorganized and maybe chaotic way with people who don't have policy experience, but they actually create upward pressure on their governance systems to accommodate their desires.” (Manager in a technical assistance group.)

Interviewees said that they are interested in cross-jurisdictional collaborations and sharing practices, but that formulas and guidelines generally aren't needed or aren't utilized.

“But we don't let many opportunities pass when it comes to networking with other communities trying to do the same thing. But we're also finding that we don't really have a lot to help each other [with] other than like, ‘Okay, we're doing this together. We're all kind of in the same place.’” (Manager in an advocacy organization)

Community identity and civic pride

Economic and other community development in rural California draws on community pride and identity that is rooted in the fabric of local rural places. Interviewees communicated this with their enthusiasm for their local communities, but also in specifically describing the experience of living in these places. The interviews indicate that natural resource amenities and outdoor recreation are a key part of community identity, civic pride and “ownership of place,” as one interviewee describes it. (Interviewees often use “natural resource amenities” interchangeably with “outdoor recreation.”)

In general, interviewees described a “pride of ownership,” “resiliency,” and “toughness” for having stayed in places that have experienced environmental disasters and structural economic transformations. They also characterize the experience of the day-to-day grind of living in places with limited services and weather extremes.

“You know, communities built on extraction to support communities far away, including San Francisco and Reno and Virginia City.... Those communities [have] proven to be pretty resilient in just surviving. I wouldn't say many of them have thrived, but they are resilient. And interestingly enough, there's a tremendous amount of local pride at the micro level, at the community level, in that resilience.” (Executive in a state agency)

Many interviewees describe this community pride and identity as forming the basis for community development. This process is partly creating a brand and “placemaking,” but elements of these stories and the source of pride and ownership must be “bonafide”. As such, the histories of these rural economies and

their creation, and narratives about the people, businesses, and institutions are crucial aspects of community development.

“But the core activity [in destination development projects] has to be bonafide. When you talk about people based on recreation, the core activity that they're engaging in, that's probably the most important feature of everything. Is it going to be a great experience? Is it a cool place? And I think you have to look at how that happens, is it the real deal or not?” (Executive in a technical assistance group)

One organization we interviewed described this process by describing how the communities of Woodland and Winters, near Sacramento, have grown their downtowns, developed tourism, promoted agricultural amenities with the farm-to-fork movement (events and restaurants), and developed an agricultural technology incubator. The development, according to the interviewee, highlighted and emphasized fundamentals of the places by leveraging the agricultural character of the towns.

“[Promoting a community is] not just marketing, getting to say, ‘Oh the restaurants have great food from the local farms.’ But [the community shows] the story of how agriculture is done in the region and how economies are being built...to support those industries, whether it's a food hub or a processing facility or whatever. So it's kind of the narrative of what our [industries and local lands]... are used for.” (Manager in a regional group)

Another technical assistance group describes success in terms of building regional capacity by supporting communities to create a sense of place and identity to support the next generation of community members.

“We define success in terms of helping to create partnerships between institutions ... and local communities, being able to create regional partnerships that address regional challenges.... and that we create a region that has a sense of place and a sense of identity that's strong enough to keep younger, more diverse groups of people to really attract them here.” (Manager in a technical assistance group)

For mature recreation communities, outdoor recreation is a fundamental part of civic pride and identity, and can be harnessed in a similar way for community and economic development. Lake Tahoe and Mammoth fall into these categories. For well-developed, mature recreation communities, community and economic development should emphasize the lifestyle and character of the place, according to the interviewees.

“[What] we don't want to do is just blindly welcome any company.... [We want to have companies and] workers here also fit with the lifestyle of [our region].” (Manager in a regional group)

Another interviewee echoed the same goal, describing the need for workforce and economic development to emphasize the lifestyle of an outdoor recreation community.

“It's not easy to live in the mountains when you get 400 inches of snow in a winter.... And so a lot of the types of businesses that we would like to see attracted to our region we feel need to fall into that category of recreation, health and wellness, those kinds of things...We look at...growing a small ski company, making custom skis as being a perfect partner and perfect potential option for a... business [in our region].” (Executive in a regional organization)

In other places, outdoor recreation is an emerging part of community pride and identity, a trend that many think can be fostered and supported. In one case, an interviewee described a foray into community development with a recreation event in a small rural town. One organization, working in a rural region, is expanding its work into new areas of the region by offering events in new places.

“We moved [an outdoor recreation] event downtown into [a small town in our region], so that [participants] start and finish in the city park. And I would say that has really bolstered our relationship with the [town] because they were so proud to have all of these people in their town. They'd never seen that number of people in town for years and years and years. [Our town partner said the last time they had seen an event as large] was some kind of lumber, timber celebration, railroad days or something 10, 15 years ago. But since then, that was the biggest thing that had come to [town].” (Manager in an advocacy organization)

Another interviewee commented on the regional effort underway from the previous interviewee's organization, noting that the effort is supporting an emerging regional identity and pride.

“I think the fact that they are building something that's beyond just one town or one county but is really kind of thinking how to pool the collective resources of that area to build a really neat kind of brand and a really neat kind of sense of identity around shared recreational opportunities.” (Manager in a technical assistance group)

Visions for the future

Building civic pride and community identity takes place formally with public hearings and workshops at the Fire Safe Council. It also happens informally at Taco Tuesdays and the weekly bike shop ride. Civic pride and community identity provide the foundation for future strategic planning and establishing community goals. Active visioning processes based on this foundation can introduce new ideas that inject energy and vitality into rural places.

Interviewees said that creating a shared vision involves confronting hard questions about community identity, history, and priorities. These dialogues are a constructive way to build capacity and foster long-term, collaborative relationships. Creating a vision also involves identifying and empowering new voices in engagement efforts and public processes. These voices may be people who were previously not known, who are new to the community, who were somehow marginalised, or who are just coming of age and want to participate in public life.

Developing a shared community vision stood out as one of the most necessary and fundamental activities for communities to successfully move forward with projects of all types, not just those related to outdoor recreation. Though we heard many success stories, well-coordinated engagement efforts for creating long-term shared visions are described as frequently incomplete, omitted, or unsuccessful.

Three interviewee quotes illustrate the importance of community visioning, but note capacity challenges and their frustrations.

“So if you can start to say, ‘Here's tools, and here's a vision, and here's some resources,’ and get people on board, I think people will carry that water or they'll start to push for it. But right now there's a bit of a vacuum.” (Executive in a business group)

“And I just think that it's challenging working with [a large agency], it's challenging working with local government jurisdictions, especially when city council members change every couple of years. But if you had ways to really focus in on that collaborative aspect of bringing people together around [the question,] ‘what does the future of our region look like, and how do we get there?’ And recreation is a component of that. Then I think we'll see more progress.” (Executive of a regional group)

“So we're really working on the infrastructure [for reducing visitor traffic to popular recreation spots.] But if you don't have a vision for who you want to bring here, how do you know what infrastructure they're going to need?” (Manager in a regional organization)

This interviewee from a technical assistance organization connects the notion of visioning new ideas with the existing character of a place. The interviewee says that recrafting community identity requires coordination of the stakeholders, but also local electeds and other stakeholders.

“I think also people who have that vision of what [creating a new identity] can mean and really investing in the sense of what you want to build, a regional identity around a certain set of opportunities or practices, whether it's mountain biking or other kind of natural affordances. It's really about having everyone be coordinated about that branding, and the focus of the activity.... I think people are just going to have to be available for that kind of thinking. And yeah, in some ways, it's you just have to sort of show people that vision.” (Manager in a technical assistance group)

One interviewee from an advocacy organization describes connecting their core work on outdoor recreation development with regional community development in an emerging regional plan. The interviewee discussed how over many years, a recreation activity and the engagement and business that took shape transformed the community.

“We're looking at our mission as an organization through the lens of community development now, and providing that recreation is used as another industry to each of these communities. And so that has led us to this bigger project that we've just started to undertake this year, [a regional master plan for recreation.]” (Manager in an advocacy organization)

Shared visions are fundamental for crafting strategies and plans that stand a chance of integration into policy and garnering resources from investors and governments. Advocates, technical assistance providers, and public agency representatives alike voiced the importance for community groups to bring coherent, streamlined visions into planning and funding processes. Government agencies want to support community groups, but they rely on coordination to happen away from their internal processes to be able to field requests and to collaborate effectively.

A regional manager from a federal agency describes how crucial community visioning is for the planning process given their own capacity challenges to support individual communities.

“[What] we want to do is create a greater community vision for where they want to be in the future with regard to their outdoor recreation opportunities on public lands.... So, we want communities to become more organized and work together and then bring prioritized projects to [our agency], under partnership agreements and have a plan, plan of attack.” (Manager in a federal agency)

Economic diversification

We asked interviewees to describe economic development goals in terms of equity, prosperity, and a middle-income segment of the community. We also asked them to describe how a diverse economy that supports a middle class might be accomplished in their local communities.

The interviews indicate that codified economic development strategies that articulate economic prosperity and middle class goals are not typical or standard in rural communities in California. Neither are economic development strategies that cover outdoor recreation.

The interviewees also describe a key contradiction that presents a dilemma for the future of their communities. On the one hand, many acknowledge the prerogative of economic growth as a strategy to resist shocks and offer more middle-income jobs. But they also acknowledge that rural communities typically regard growth as threatening to basic, and deeply rooted, character and culture of rural places.

We don't offer a solution for the contradiction, but note that it represents a fundamental issue for community and recreation development. The sections below elaborate on these issues, and offer illustrative quotes.

Economic equity, prosperity, middle class

Few interviewees cited comprehensive strategies or specific initiatives that address economic equity in rural communities. Some interviewees suggested that it is unrealistic to expect middle-income wages in rural economics. Broadly, local leaders did not often identify economic prosperity or equity as an area of emphasis in their communities.

One interviewee offered that their strategy is to provide assistance across the entire economy, but that community leaders do not focus on creating a middle class.

"I think you see in some more urban areas or areas that might have a little bit more financial affluence, you will see organizations that are strategically focusing on enhancing middle class or enhancing specific sectors of their economy or specific targeted residents. But I think we need assistance across our entire economy and across all of our residents." (Executive, business group)

Only a couple interviewees described sector or cluster-based planning efforts that are more commonplace in metropolitan economic development strategy. Some tools cited included Tourism Business Improvement Districts (TBIDs), a business assessment to promote tourism activities, and Property Business Improvement Districts (PBIDs), which can fund infrastructure development that benefit local businesses. Opportunity Zones were also cited, but the references did not outline success stories. One interviewee indicated that many local officials had not taken advantage of Opportunity Zones. No interviewees cited planning efforts like Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies (CEDS), though CEDS cover some regions where interviewees work.

Another interviewee said it might not be realistic to expect income levels in rural areas to be similar to larger, more diverse economies in metropolitan areas. But, the interviewee noted, the influence of metro regions on the cost of living in rural places puts an undue burden on residents who don't have access to similar income opportunities.

“I think it's great to continually pursue ways that we can increase parity, pay parity between those areas. But I ask the question, should we...[The question of pay parity] gets really messy when you start looking at the influences of outside money [in rural communities], particularly when it comes to second home ownership and availability of affordable housing...From that perspective it's like, yeah, of course you've got to have pay parity so people can afford to live there. (Executive, state agency)

Lack of economic development strategy and capacity

Capacity is an issue for economic development generally, leaving aside any specific community initiative around growing a middle-income segment of the population. A number of interviewees indicated a widespread lack of economic development strategy and capacity for business attraction and promotion.

We interviewed regional civic leadership and business organizations, and economic development organizations, and discovered in the course of our research that many rural counties have offices of economic development and chambers of commerce. Still, several interviewees viewed regional and local economic development capacity as non-existent or nascent, even in the most well developed places we covered.

One interviewee from a mature recreation economy put in this way:

“I feel like ...we do nothing to actually have a strategic economic development strategy that we're going out and investing dollars, and promoting, and recruiting businesses. [Local leaders are] developing the infrastructure. It just has never, I guess, been a priority.... There's no one that's sitting down and making calls to the Bay Area and saying, ‘Hey, would your company be interested in opening a remote office in [our area]?’ Here's the tax incentives we could offer if you move your employees here. Here's a welcome packet on how to do business.... Our annual budget has a total of zero dollars for economic development in it.” (Manager, regional organization)

Greater economic diversity in rural economies

Some interviewees from the most well developed rural communities we covered acknowledged the need to diversify industries to create a more sustainable economy that offers middle-income wages.

“We live and die on tourism here. We have no manufacturing. We have no technology. We have no agriculture.” (Executive, business group)

“What is challenging for [our region] is that...we're more heavily dependent on tourism now than we used to be and when you add in inflation our regional economy has actually declined...so we are not a thriving regional economy by any stretch of imagination and we're too dependent on tourism so [our organization's] role as basically as the region's economic development organization is to find opportunities to reverse that trend” (Executive, regional organization)

“I can't tell you the number of people I've known, who I think had a lot to contribute to the community, who get to a point that say, ‘You know, having to look for new housing every six months and waiting tables, and having all of my conversations start with ‘Hey, bro, did you ski today?’ has gotten tiresome. I'm out’.... How do you create a place where that person feels like they can come have a stable life in the community that they don't have to leave for culture, they don't have to leave for economic stability? A common conversation I have with people are like, ‘Oh, I lived here in the

late '90s and it was the best time of my life but I was going to get married and have kids. I need a real job so I had to go.' That, to me, is one of the great weaknesses of recreation economies.” (Executive, business group)

A couple interviewees suggested that a more diverse economy would be able to act as a buffer against economic shocks.

“At some point in time, we don't know.... [that] the tourism economy is going to stay as strong as it is right now. So, when do you wait to diversify? Do you wait to diversify because you don't want growth until tourists are no longer coming there because...something's happened? It wasn't that long ago...[during the recession] there were people in [our community] that were getting laid off, or a lot of people left.... [A major resort employer] laid 75 people off on a single day. It was a huge part of the stable year-round workforce. (Executive, business group)

“I think [community development efforts] really have to be about, how do [jobs and economic growth] contribute to the resilience, the stability, the diversity, the attractiveness and livability in the culture of the communities that we live in.” (Executive of a business group)

Concerns about growth

When discussing economic development and diversification, interviewees cited widespread anti-development and anti-growth sentiments in many rural communities throughout the state. These interviewees regarded the sentiment as basically grounded in fears of change to the character of the place, and change to the quality of life due to overcrowding and environmental impacts.

Many interviewees grappled with the notion that economic development could yield opportunity for rural communities, but acknowledge that growth contradicts something basic about the culture and character of the communities. Growth, according to many interviewees, represents a basic and serious concern for many residents and leaders.

A few quotes represent many responses we heard.

“[If] I tell [a rural community] ‘Okay your community of 7,000 is going to become 50,000 in the next 10 years because we're going to do this economic development strategy for you there.’ The only person that's going to be happy about that is the city manager and maybe the city council.... I haven't figured out how to talk to people about [economic development] in a way that maintains why they went to these communities in the first place, and how to maintain real character.” (Manager, technical assistance group)

“I'd say one of the bigger challenges that's been interesting is that there's an interesting level of engagement and also distrust around economic development, especially in tourism economies. For example [in our community] I found that there is a fair amount of number of people that are like, ‘We're a tourism destination and all of our focus should just be increasing our tourism’.... we don't want to think about [more permanent residents] coming here.” (Executive in a business group)

“So I think the places that are ultimately going to be successful over a long period of time are going to be really good at saying no eventually and saying, we're going to limit growth for the purpose of maintaining the highest quality of the product that we have here, and that product in my opinion is

largely based on the condition of the natural environment.... I would much rather see a community not grow in size but grow in health and that the indicators of success be based on the health and wellbeing of a community rather than the size of the community.” (Executive in a state agency)

Outdoor recreation as an economic development opportunity

On the other hand, the discussion about economic diversification showed that most interviewees view outdoor recreation as an economic development opportunity in spite of anti-growth sentiments. Many interviewees noted the potential for rural communities to foster outdoor recreation as an economic development opportunity, replete with new gear and apparel manufacturers, guide services and outfitters, and the secondary and tertiary impacts that result from tourism. These interviewees note the opportunity in the face of the decades-long decline of resource extraction and its dwindling economic impact.

“Rural areas have had a drastic economic shift in a short period of time and they need to pivot to something. It seems to be like that's where we're kind of seeing some of these little organic recreation type movements springing up.” (Manager in a technical assistance group)

This interviewee talked about the decline of the gaming industry in Lake Tahoe, and the promise of outdoor recreation.

“With the introduction of Indian gaming in California...a long transformation occurred [for gaming in Tahoe]... recognizing the need to diversify [into]...the tourism or recreation product. And really there was an I think a collective eye-opening over a period of time to the fact that...what we really have to offer [as a business proposition] ...was the outdoor treasures in the Tahoe Basin.” (Executive in a state agency)

Another interviewee noted official shifts in Forest Service policies and practices in planning recreation and travel management that places emphasis on outdoor recreation as an economic driver.

“All these [Forest Service] management plans that we've all been working under in this part of the state are still like heavy-duty on forestry and timber and that sort of thing, but I think there's really broad consensus [that reliance on extraction for economic opportunity is no longer a reality]... so we have to swing it completely over into a more sustainable economic situation. And I think that the consensus is landing on outdoor recreation.” (Executive in an advocacy organization)

One notable interviewee noted how rural development strategies that encourage outdoor recreation need to consider necessary, ubiquitous elements that lead to successful economic development. These factors include access to markets for customers and logistics, nearby airports, access to capital and business services, access to talent, and access to key residential community services like healthcare. These are “long-term plays” according to the interviewee that take decades to establish, not about “sprinkling on special sauce” of outdoor recreation activity and expecting automatic outcomes.

“The outdoor industry is...a group of businesses.... the business needs can be very specific, but in general, especially from a higher view, at 10,000 foot level, they're a lot the same.... they need access to capital, they need...talent. They need connection to the rest of the world whether that's through air service or the internet, and good telecommunications.” (Executive of a business group)

Attracting entrepreneurs and encouraging high-tech startup businesses

Several of the interviewees have roles in advancing entrepreneurship activity in local communities. They discussed visions for developing assets that include access to capital (venture and accelerator funding, access to small business funds), technical support for business start-ups (mentorship, business service support) coworking and incubator space, creating professional connections and small communities for remote workers and start up companies.

Interviewees presented these emerging possibilities in the context of developing a diverse economy with middle class jobs. Rural communities with recreation amenities can entice young entrepreneurs in tech, design or other professional and business services to relocate based on access to recreation amenities and high quality of life. Rural communities could attract companies like gear and apparel outfitters, who benefit from the proximity to recreation amenities for brand marketing or product testing purposes. Several interviewees cited important nascent plans taking shape, such as development along Ski Run Blvd in South Lake Tahoe, as intentional efforts to develop a cluster of outdoor-recreation based companies.

Although some communities are expanding business opportunities, interviewees emphasized that these entrepreneurship activities in rural places are often aspirational, and face some key challenges. While existing infrastructure can support businesses and a remote workforce, that activity remains dependent on nearby metro regions and distant clients and employers. In many cases, these businesses and employees do not have local employers or clients, and frequently work with remote teams. Employees who lose their jobs are challenged to find comparable ones nearby, and sometimes are forced to move back to the metro regions they came from. Start-up companies are similarly dependent on distant expertise to fill in local talent gaps. In one case, a partnership between a local community college and a coworking space sought to bridge the gap with training and internships with resident businesses.

This is an area worthy of future research, including quantitative analysis for innovation indicators that can offer additional insight into the relationship between outdoor recreation amenities and startup and other innovation and commercialization indicators.

One interviewee describes the challenges in getting a venture accelerator started in a small rural community.

“I had hopes [that a major town business interest] would start thinking about creating some kind of startup incubator accelerator fund within their [rural] communities, where their...properties are. That has not come to fruition, even though there's been several conversations around it. There is not a startup incubator accelerator program in [our town]. There's been a lot of talk about it. But those things tend to be labor of love, passion projects.” (Executive in a business group)

Another interviewee said the greatest challenge was enticing high technology investment to look outside metropolitan California.

“[Here in California]...there's just so much wealth, and wealth to be made in urban areas with high tech and...you can't do high tech out in the middle of nowhere.... [In] terms of large organizations, or just organizations putting a large effort into rural here [in California], I think it's hard to get that going.... It's not, I don't want to say it's not sexy enough; it just doesn't have enough return.... You

don't see people running around dumping money big pots of money into rural areas, because the payback is slow and a lot more risky.” (Manager, technical assistance group)

Basic tourism services

Several interviewees noted the importance of tourism development activities, especially for communities in the most disconnected, weakest economies. Tourism represents an important way to capture revenue and generate economic activity where not much is happening. These communities often lack the capacity and know how to identify key assets, develop a strategy, and to do promotion.

“And I'm not the one to get into the politics of logging or not but the point is logging disappeared and many of these rural places really were thrown into...depression.... [They experienced a] big impact on their local economy. And tourism jobs have just never paid [the] kind of freight [that logging did] but it's the only thing that a lot of them have.... And so, 20, 30 years later...the level of poverty in some areas is grinding. And there isn't a...community college on every corner [in rural Northern California] for skill-building.... And so, you got a lot of people that could be gainfully employed and tourism would offer at least some option.” (Executive in a technical assistance group)

Unique rural and recreation assets

Many interviewees agreed that rural California has a regional comparative advantage based on natural resources and outdoor recreation amenities. One interviewee described this advantage as it relates to one rural California community that has successfully developed a wealth of recreation opportunities.

“These kind of rural areas [have] very specific advantages over more clogged urban areas. And so, I think getting people to think about rural life is not operating from a deficit but operating from certain set of advantages that could be capitalized on.” (Manager in a technical assistance group)

In this case, the primary comparative advantage the interviewees talked about in rural California is lifestyle amenities. While there can be a development strategy based on specific outdoor recreation-type businesses, the interviewees generally said that such development is the byproduct of a community that is surrounded by open space and access to outdoor recreation opportunities. Recreation amenities are correlated with a high quality of life and can attract people and businesses to a region and keep them there, according to the interviewees.

“People want to work where they want to live. Businesses want to be where people want to live. And so [livability based on outdoor recreation is] really an opportunity for us to attract talent and workforce and additional investment.” (Executive in a business group)

Another interviewee from a rural region that has a medium-size anchor town described the same phenomenon. Trails within a short drive from town add to the quality of life.

“Even if someone's sitting on a keyboard down in [town], their choice to come to [our town] and to contribute to the [county] economy has that tied to recreational trails even though they're not directly working [on trails]. So that's the thing we always try to keep in mind [are these] overall benefits that [contribute to] the quality of life.” (Manager in a conservation organization)

One interviewee described the experience of living in an outdoor recreation community as blurring boundaries between work and life, noting the experience as an emerging trend.

“We live three miles away from our office and [my husband] mountain bikes to work. So for us to be able to make that transition [from Silicon Valley to a mountain town] was incredibly important. Our health is better, we have more time with our family, more leisure time, and ultimately I think are actually more productive as a result of it. ... I think we're seeing a lot more people that are looking and willing to move where they want to live, and what matches their lifestyle, and figure your work around it, rather than take vacations or take weekend trips. It seems to be much more of a work-life integration than a work-life balance, and I think that's a positive move as a society.” (Executive in a business group)

Interviewees widely see outdoor recreation and lifestyle amenities as a community development trend in rural California. Much of this, they note is based on proximity to public land and open space.

“Some communities seemed to have really [seen] the writing on the wall [of outdoor recreation development]...maybe even if they don't have the best geographic location in a lot of ways, trying to get it together to find ways to increase quality of life for younger skilled labor and retain them.” (Manager of a technical assistance group)

Another interviewee says that as many rural communities organize and promote outdoor recreation some activities have grown more popular, and peer communities are realizing the potential sources of revenue.

“I think that all of a sudden, more individualized activities like mountain biking, like hiking have ...become more and more popular over the last 10 or 20 years. I think the equipment has gotten better and it's enabled more people to get out. I think there is an acceptance or knowledge that these kinds of recreation activities are desirable and we have some wonderful resources, whether it's in state parks, local parks, forest service or national forest that all of a sudden, these things are revenue drivers.” (Executive in a technical assistance organization)

One leader in a regional business group commented on the success in his region of grassroots and community organizing around outdoor recreation that led to expanded recreation business activities and trail development. The process took years, but recreation-related development gathered momentum.

“[Communities in our region] figured out to say, ‘Oh well, we don't have the amenities to compete with [major] destination resorts.... And they did it...through whether it's a park system in [our town] or... it's around skiing and winter sports... or building up nicer hotels and restaurants.... That didn't happen overnight, but it did happen over time.” (Executive in a business group)

In a few cases, interviewees spoke about development in terms of diversifying the economy with quality of life amenities but in a way that development activities preserved or enhanced the environment and the character of the place. In this case, the goal was future-oriented.

“So, in [a rural Northern California town], it's...surrounded by a bunch of public land and national forest lands. And so, how can that community most effectively move in the direction of being an outdoor recreation gateway and preserve the character of their town, and take advantage of new recreation development, or economic development opportunities based on outdoor recreation.” (Manager in a federal agency)

Another interviewee regards recreation amenities as complementing the appreciation and protection of natural resources.

“I see [development of recreation amenities as] a quality of life factor for people that are living here and existing.... [These assets] can bring value [that influences people] to stay in the area and how they spend their money, how they spend their time, and then just really complement that legacy of natural appreciation of natural resources and public lands and use of that.” (Manager in a conservation group)

Visitor impacts necessitate long-range planning

Tourism is an important revenue source for outdoor recreation communities in rural places. Places that successfully grow their recreation and natural resource amenities increase visitation. But increased visitation and community growth impacts recreation, physical and social infrastructure and environmental quality. Tourism drives service industries that tend to pay lower wages. Cost of living increases due to vacation rentals and second homes. Impacts to wildlife habitat as well as air and water quality result from trail use and traffic.

Interviewees spoke about tourism impacts and efforts to mitigate those impacts more than any other issue we covered in the research. Heavy visitor use represents one of the main challenges faced by every recreation community. For the interviewees, the realities of the most mature rural tourism meccas present a warning to nascent recreation focused communities to plan before they must develop complex solutions to unwind issues that could have been avoided.

The interviewees cited the potential for long-range planning strategies (“destination management,” “destination stewardship,” “sustainable recreation planning”) to guide future development. This approach, however, is not yet a widely adopted practice. A few described long-range planning as emerging from state level actors, and in the field especially for destination marketing and tourism development. Others cite “sustainable recreation” as another emerging trend in planning around Forest Service recreation projects.

Impacts mentioned in the interviews include the following:

- Overcrowded or damaged recreation facilities and related trail infrastructure
- Reduced quality of life for residents due to traffic congestion, high cost of living and limited housing due to second and vacation homes
- Environmental impacts to wildlife, air and water quality
- Visitor and resident experience due to staffing challenges for service industries
- Impacts to the economy with a preponderance of low-wage service employment

Over-tourism and overuse impacts

Interviewees voiced strong and clear concerns about the scale of community impacts from over tourism and visitation. One interviewee described the population in a recreation community increasing by a factor of four or five on some weekends.

“[Our region is the] size of New Hampshire with a population of 25,000 or less. On any given weekend, the total community population can be four or five times the size with tourists.... That’s a pretty disruptive experience.” (Executive in a business group)

Many interviewees describe a trend of accelerating visitor and participant activity that results in excessive use of resources compared to what the community is prepared to handle.

“Our level of enjoyment of public land has sky-rocketed in the... last 10 years, but the last five years in particular.” (Manager in a federal agency)

Stages of development and impact level

The interviewees recognize that some communities are more impacted than others, often determined by a community’s stage in development. Communities that have thriving visitation and well-trodden recreation amenities look for solutions to repair infrastructure, get people out of their cars, and diversify their economies. Other places are trying to catalyze and grow a tourism market where any economic activity is welcome. These places might have legacy environmental impacts from extractive industry activity, but they have yet to experience contemporary overcrowding from tourists.

The size of a community doesn’t necessarily determine the potential for impacts. For many small towns and places without much room to grow, small increases in activity can put pressure on transportation, housing, parking, and other services.

The interviewees below shared observations about the spectrum of development stages in different communities, and corresponding tourism impacts.

“I think [a town in the central Sierra], north of us, has done a great job at redefining and rebuilding their recreation infrastructure and going from extraction-based economy to a recreation-based economy.... It feels like [our region] is at a different stage in their lifecycle. It seems like a lot of the rural communities are really trying to develop and build their recreation economy, and we’re already to the point where we’re trying to diversify away from our recreation economy.” (Manager in a regional group)

“Some communities in California are experiencing quite the opposite of where we’re at, where they’re really addressing over-tourism and coming at destination development from that angle almost like... putting out a fire.” (Executive in a business group)

“A lot of what we are dealing with Aspen dealt with 10 years ago.” (Executive in a business group)

Understanding and acknowledging impacts

Interviewees describe tremendous frustration with their communities’ inability to keep up with the scale of visitor impacts. Sometimes, strategies and solutions to mitigate and address impacts are not understood, identified, or agreed upon. Just as often, the interviewees describe having an acute awareness of problems with transit, parking, and environmental impacts, but lack the resources and coordination to address the issues. Most interviewees acknowledge that they are falling short of addressing the impacts.

One interviewee cites multiple capacity challenges to manage visitor impacts on the environment.

“There are concerns that we're overwhelming our natural resources and then we have too many people coming at certain times a year, and how do we mitigate that? There's a problem that there are just more and more people traveling, and how do you manage that? How does your rural government or how does your rural area manage the influx of people when we don't have the infrastructure capacity, that we don't have the manpower capacity, and sometimes that we don't have the financial capacity?” (Executive in a business group)

Another interviewee challenges the notion of scarcity, the view that there are too many tourists in a mature recreation community. Instead, a lack of strategy and poor infrastructure are to blame, he says.

“[At] what point do people start loving [our region] to death, and do the conditions of the natural resources and the recreation infrastructure degrade to the point where people want to stop coming here? I think a lot of people think [and] say that we have too many tourists and visitors in town, but I think we just do a really poor job at managing the ones we have, and if we had better management strategies and better infrastructure, I think the issues and the pressure points we feel along with that would be alleviated.” (Manager in a regional group)

Another interviewee says bluntly that their community has no management strategy for visitors.

“All we do is market to people. We just market to people outside the region and we get them here, and once they make the left turn off the highway, onto our city streets, we're done with them. That's our mindset.” (Executive in a business group)

Long-range planning solutions

Many interviewees acknowledge the need for long-range planning as an approach for emerging communities to avoid the pitfalls of the mature recreation and heavily visited communities. At the same time, interviewees note that long-range planning can help the most impacted communities to unwind and create solutions to traffic congestion, environmental degradation, and other issues.

Several interviewees warn that emerging communities can learn lessons from the most impacted communities by creating long-range plans that anticipate success.

“I think the late [stage communities] are running into these traffic and housing issues, [if] a bit of early stage economies dealt with those issues earlier... they would save themselves a lot of time, hassle, and dislocation.” (Executive in a regional business group)

“I think the time spent ahead in planning for success, planning for ways to accommodate increased visitorship and increased spending and increased congestion is well worth it, because I don't think [a mature recreation town and region] did a very good job...of

Interviewees offered several strategic planning processes for long-range planning to include sustainable recreation strategies and actions. These planning tools include:

- General and Community Plans
- Regional transportation planning
- Destination management and stewardship
- US Forest Service Travel Management
- Sustainable recreation planning

planning ahead in thinking that they were going to be as successful as they've been, and now they're playing catch up.” (Executive in a state agency)

One interviewee notes that growth from success can happen quickly, and have rapid consequences.

“[Emerging tourism destinations] are just trying to get people to spend money in their community and if it gets discovered and it explodes...I mean, things go crazy. And if they don't have any good growth management plans in place, then it is going to be unchecked, and it is going to become... unsustainable.” (Manager in a technical assistance group)

Another interviewee points to a commonly cited issue of protecting the character of communities and the quality of life with increased visitation.

“[This] is what a lot of communities are wrestling with now or will be wrestling with if they don't anticipate these kind of problems before they start attracting huge numbers of visitors, and that is, how do we accommodate these visitors and still maintain our high quality of living here?” (Executive in a state agency)

Several interviewees describe an emerging statewide trend for local and regional practitioners in community economic development to convene and receive technical assistance to develop long-range planning tools. These strategies seek to protect the environment, preserve the character of the place, and to accommodate increased visitation. One interviewee described the trend this way:

“Having that balance of environmental stewardship and destination stewardship, it's a huge conversation.... I think when you look out ahead...we see this growth and this momentum happening, there has to be a point where we're prepared to make sure it's balanced and that we're protecting exactly what makes [our county] special in the first place, which is a conversation other parts of California are having right now.” (Executive in a business group)

Another executive in the business community talks about destination management strategy with an example of creating traffic efficiencies to enable better access to recreation amenities.

“If we can identify pressure points [in our strategy, like]...this intersection is seeing 10 times as much traffic as all these other intersections and we should consider putting a roundabout here, that could be something that helps the flow.... [The goal is] how do we get people through the system or how do we get them to the trailheads with more efficiency?” (Executive in a business group)

Several interviewees noted that incorporating sustainable recreation planning into comprehensive community planning held the promise of preserving an essential character and identity of the rural places they support. They said that such practices were necessary to preserve and protect culture and quality of life, but also to identify priorities and use community identity to promote tourism and attract business. Only one interviewee used the term, “placemaking,” but it approximates the concept many described under sustainable recreation.

Transportation and transit solutions

Transportation and transit figured into solutions for mitigating visitor impacts. In the case of a heavily-impacted area, interviewees talk about specific projects and long-range strategy that gets people out of

their cars with alternative transportation options that go to popular recreation amenities. These strategies can protect the environment as well as improve the user experience.

“And really in the future, I think we're moving towards, how can you create that car-free wonderful visitor experience for people that allows them to interact with [our natural resources] and reach all these recreation sites without degrading the natural environment.” (Manager in a regional group)

Providing transportation alternatives involves creating multiple modes of transit, according to another interviewee.

“You have to be able to offer a variety of ways to get to the trailheads, transit to the high-visitor places [citing several popular visitor destinations].... You have to offer transit opportunities and connect them via bike paths where people can get to [these destinations] without a car.” (Executive in a regional group)

Alternative recreation solutions

Mitigating visitor impacts can also involve creating alternative recreation options. In one case, creating a water trail for kayaks and Stand Up Paddleboarding sought to get people out of motorboats to reduce emissions and pollution.

“The work that I did for years and years and years in the development of [a water trail] was to look at a resource that's a finite size, but expanding it through slowing down the ability of the user to experience it.... [A] kayak...goes at 2 or 3 miles an hour in contrast with a motorboat that goes 40 or 50 miles an hour. A [large body of water] becomes a pretty small pond...when you're doing 50 miles an hour.” (Executive from a state agency)

Ecosystem services and co-benefits

Ecosystems services are a method for valuing land and services according to the various benefits they generate. These include economic as well as ecological impacts and cost avoidance from externalities like pollution.

Valuing land and services using economic models for these elements functions as a cost-benefit comparison to real estate development. Valuations create market-based arguments for encouraging infill and high-density development, and for protecting open space, forested lands, and agricultural lands.

Key for recreation is that these “services,” or uses, do not exist alone: they are bundled. By preserving public access and forested parcels from real estate development, for example, recreation benefits are preserved along with wildlife habitat and carbon sequestration from the forest. The interviewees described how efforts to encourage one benefit most of the time yielded multiple other ecosystem services.

Ecosystems services “co-benefits” include:

- Wildlife habitat
- Carbon sequestration
- Real estate view sheds
- Groundwater recharge
- Clean water
- Runoff yield
- Cultural heritage
- Agriculture uses
- Recreation

One interviewee described the multiple benefits that are protected using one such approach in the Greater Sacramento region, the Rural-Urban Connections Strategy (RUCS):

“Rural Urban Connection Strategy, it's got a multiple set of goals. One is to keep farmland in production, and it helps meet greenhouse gas emission goals, [and] it supports one of our key clusters, but it has ecosystem services, so it helps the flood control, but it's our working [landscape.] It's our habitat, and it's our [landscape vistas.] It's our cultural heritage, but it's our experience of our quality of life to have this beautiful open space, see orchards, flyways.” (Manager in a regional group)

“Looking at the contributions that agriculture, outdoor recreation, and other benefits provided by natural and working [landscapes], I mean, everything from groundwater recharge to carbon sequestration, looking at the benefits that those provide in terms of supporting our economy, environment, quality of life...That's a big part of why we do our work and a big part of why we're interested in this idea of ecosystem services as a framework for communicating the need to value what natural and working lands provide.” (Manager in a conservation group)

Several interviewees employ ecosystem services calculations to assess local projects and regional partnerships as part of a cost-benefit analysis to justify protecting rural lands from real estate development pressures. These and other interviewees promote development of economic methods to perform land value calculations. They also want to expand the application for use in regional partnerships and initiatives, and in state-level policymaking.

For recreation proponents this means working alongside partnerships, initiatives, and policies that address multiple issues. Extending recreation amenities will happen alongside other efforts to protect and preserve landscapes for other uses and benefits. Such co-benefit partnerships make practical sense for outdoor recreation proponents and environmental stewardship organizations.

“That whole conversation started because one of the foresters was putting in a grant to take a big piece of property and show all the different ways that you can manage a forest. So we said, ‘Well, what about a cooperative trail through that project area that talks about there's a sign at each of those plots, but like an opportunity to bring in recreation. And would you mind mountain bikers on that trail or would you mind equestrian users?’ And so, it was a way to write in recreation into what would be normally a forestry grant.” (Manager in an advocacy group)

Findings and Recommendations

We intend for our research to offer insight into the opportunities that await rural California with additional investment in and community development around outdoor recreation initiatives and projects. We also intend for our work to serve as a platform for advocacy, to garner funding, and to affect policy changes that will enable rural California to build capacity and make community investments in outdoor recreation efforts that lead to broader community benefits. In this section, we present our main findings from the report and make recommendations for practitioners and for state and local leaders to use as they craft communications strategies, policy agendas, strategic plans, and grant applications.

Among practitioners, outdoor recreation definitions are inconsistent; complicating the ability of advocates and potential allies to align interests, spearhead new initiatives, and track impacts.

There is a general understanding of outdoor recreation from practitioners we interviewed, but no central, agreed-upon definitions that help localities develop strategies and track progress. Practitioners also struggle to articulate the scale and scope of activity in their communities. We think the lack of a common understanding is related to the dearth of local studies on economic impacts and other strategic analysis of outdoor recreation. Standard definitions of included activities and widely available resources would support outdoor recreation practitioners and their potential allies as they make the case for outdoor recreation development strategies.

Recommendations:

- National and state agencies, and third-party technical assistance providers should continue to develop methodologies to track outdoor recreation related economic data, such as those used by the [Bureau of Economic Analysis \(BEA\)](#), the [Outdoor Industry Association](#), and other groups such as those identified in our bibliography ([Appendix C](#)). They should facilitate technical assistance and training to local government agencies and other private local groups about how to use this data and implement similar studies at a local level.
- Local governments or economic development agencies should also gather data such as trail use with physical counters, cell phone travel data, consumer spending at retail establishments, and transient occupancy tax receipts. The data will help decision makers and stakeholders understand aggregate demand and comparative trends related to outdoor recreation. By better understanding demand and establishing baselines, local leaders can make informed decisions for long-range planning goals to better advocate for state and federal support, and to track progress.
- Local leaders should draw on model definitions and work with stakeholders to create their own community-specific definitions of outdoor recreation and incorporate them into General Plan and Community Plan documents and economic development strategies. (Our bibliography in [Appendix C](#) contains references to papers with industry and activity definitions from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service and Headwaters Economics, among others.) This would allow communities to prioritize outdoor recreation development goals and

track activity through existing business licensing and permitting processes, and other implementation goals.

Partnerships and coalitions between local stakeholders and state and federal agencies are instrumental for effective governance and community development. However, limited capacity at all levels and generally weak or absent regional planning systems impedes progress.

Rural California has an array of federal, state, regional, and local actors and overlapping jurisdictions whose varied interests present both opportunities and challenges to outdoor recreation partnerships. In some counties, Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO), Councils of Governments (COG), economic development organizations or civic leadership organizations have geographic territories that stretch from more urban metros into rural areas. However, limited staffing and resources within these organizations, where they are present, reduce their ability to focus on outdoor recreation initiatives. Further, local staffing capacity in town and county government agencies, nonprofit and volunteer organizations is not sufficient to execute outdoor recreation projects or convene partners at the geographic scale needed without outside resources.

Recommendations:

- Regional organizations are necessary to support cross-jurisdiction development and initiatives at the landscape or watershed scale. These entities should consist of local representation to ensure that community priorities and needs are coordinated and addressed. Larger governing bodies are better positioned to connect with state lawmakers and push for funding. State agencies should provide financial and technical support to counties and groups that want to create or expand regional development entities. Interviewees cited the [Sierra Buttes Trail Stewardship](#), [Sierra Nevada Conservancy](#), and the [Eastern Sierra Sustainable Recreation Partnership](#) as successful regional consortia models that promote outdoor recreation initiatives.
- We recommend that state and local leaders plan for and invest in pilot or demonstration projects to build capacity in local regions. Successful projects can attract greater investment and build relationships that set the stage for large projects in the future. The growth of [bikeways around Lake Tahoe](#) is one example of sustainable recreation, taking steps toward connecting communities with a safe, non-motorized transit option.
- We learned about the value of a dedicated county trail coordinator and economic development professional that is focused on outdoor recreation projects and partnerships. Communities that want to encourage outdoor recreation development should incorporate these dedicated positions into existing or new offices. A single, dedicated individual can enable engagement, coordination, planning and direction for community and volunteer-driven initiatives. Additional staff is likely needed in many other areas of government and private sector at a local level to encourage successful and sustained outdoor recreation efforts.

Community catalysts play a key role in driving community transformation; these catalysts are agents of culture shifts and represent the vanguard for the future of rural California.

Culture, identity and history greatly influence outdoor recreation potential specifically as well as economic activity broadly. Community catalysts are elected officials, activist residents, business owners,

investors, or heads of grassroots nonprofit advocacy groups that understand and appreciate this culture and use it to inform appropriate development in their communities. Their role is to help communities embrace new ideas, spearhead innovative project proposals and rally efforts around shared goals and visioning. Many of these leaders of outdoor recreation projects are known, but others are not yet identified.

Recommendations:

- Community catalysts need open, supportive community contexts, relationships with local, state, and federal partners, and financial support to move projects forward. Local and state governments should identify these catalysts and facilitate connections with potential project partners and resources.
- Communities can leverage a bonafide, deeply rooted identity in planning and developing outdoor recreation programs and projects. They could conduct research such as oral histories from long time residents or review of archives to learn about important community elements. That information can be shared through signage along trail systems, heritage fairs and festivals, temporary or permanent museums or developed into tourism content and broadly marketed.
- State and local leaders should identify and encourage new participants in the outdoor recreation movement in rural communities. These can include leadership programs, technical assistance provision, community engagement and outreach.
- Additional research is needed to explore the cultural factors that lead to successful outdoor recreation partnerships and projects in rural areas. These success stories could offer a roadmap that other communities can follow and adapt for their own initiatives.

Shared goals, visioning, and long-range planning at all levels of government and among local community stakeholders are essential for rural communities to benefit from their outdoor recreation advantage.

Rural advantages are found when communities draw on local pride and history to enhance outdoor recreation activities and natural resource amenities. With visioning engagement, communities identify shared goals and craft long-range strategic plans that guide future projects, programs and policies. Through this process, community members confront hard questions about identity, history and priorities in a constructive way that builds capacity and fosters collaborative relationships. While templates and toolkits are useful to guide this work, they are insufficient for inciting community transformations. Communities must create their own future, and should integrate the best of their history and identity to achieve placemaking goals. State-level initiatives can provide much needed support to encourage these efforts.

Recommendations:

- The results of local visioning and goal setting exercises need to be codified into local, state and federal government planning strategies. Local governments should facilitate community working groups to explore long-term growth, outdoor recreation infrastructure development and maintenance, and destination stewardship and management. Community engagement outcomes

must find their way into General or Community Plans to guide future development. Similar convening should continue at the state and federal level for US Forest service travel management, sustainable recreation efforts. This type of shared goal setting was instrumental for the recent [US Forest Service 10-Year Trail Shared Stewardship Challenge](#).

- Trusted peer groups from government and businesses outside the region can be ideal partners for capacity building and technical assistance. These groups can offer suggestions from lessons learned in their own communities. To the extent that communities utilize toolkits and templates from external sources, they should be an outgrowth of embedded long-range planning strategies and broader community capacity building over multi-year efforts.

Metropolitan California has an outsized influence on rural California, yielding positive and negative consequences for the regions. While tourism and business growth brings economic opportunity, heavy demand strains community and natural resources.

Metropolitan California is responsible for much of the outdoor recreation and economic activity that occurs in rural communities (from visitor use), as well as the attendant environmental and community impacts. Rural California experienced increased recreation-based tourism, vacation and second home ownership, and new permanent residents (especially retirees) over the past decade. Trends toward greater remote work and location-agnostic businesses can bring economic benefits to rural communities as individuals and families prioritize quality of-life factors over proximity to traditional urban job centers. But these, and other, urban-rural dependencies, also produce negative impacts on natural resources, quality of life, and affordability in local rural economies. Communities understand that economic development is necessary to achieve prosperity and build resiliency. However, many fear that growth will erode the existing character and quality of life in rural places.

Recommendations:

- Urban metros should be involved in supporting and planning rural California’s outdoor recreation future. There is precedent for urban-rural collaboration that can be used as a model for future partnership. Statewide water and environmental bond measures provide funding to mitigate impacts at the headwaters. Environmental advocacy and regional planning organizations, such as the [California Tahoe Conservancy](#), [Eastern Sierra Sustainable Recreation Partnership](#) and [Visit California](#), work on initiatives that bridge the disconnect between urban and rural impacts. Local leaders and state policymakers should continue to build relationships and provide support to regional groups such as these.
- In spite of challenges from increased demand, tourism and residential relocations generate important revenue for local government and small businesses. Local governments should explore creating new revenue streams, such as establishing finance mechanisms like tourism business improvement districts, sales taxes, or transient occupancy taxes. These strategies have been used successfully in places like [Mammoth Lakes](#) to create a dedicated funding source that is used to improve infrastructure and maintain essential services that support the broader, permanent population as well as tourists.
- Research is needed to identify innovation hubs and technology clusters in small town outdoor recreation communities, and to learn about the factors that led to early success and determine key

challenges that could be addressed by policy or cultural changes. The results of such research could offer insight into the relationship between outdoor recreation amenities and communities that support startups and other innovative initiatives.

Rural communities cannot thrive on hospitality and tourism alone. Pivoting to a more diverse economy will require both a culture that embraces change as well as a plan for guiding and managing growth. This will require a concerted effort between state leaders and local stakeholders to build diverse economies, protect open space and public lands, and elevate local community character and identity.

With California's population expected to reach [50 million by 2050](#), parts of rural California can benefit from residential and visitor growth. Managing that growth will take a concerted effort between state leaders and local stakeholders to build diverse economies with a thriving middle-income segment. Such efforts should prioritize investing in physical infrastructure, protecting open space and public lands, and elevating local community character and identity. Mature recreation communities present long-range, strategic planning examples that areas with emerging activity can pattern to enhance outdoor recreation access while minimizing environmental, economic, and other community impacts.

Recommendations:

- Communities need to prioritize staffing capacity and physical infrastructure, such as broadband, that supports increased demand and activity. State leaders must work with local entities to increase capacity for long-range economic development planning that envisions economic resiliency and a growing middle-income segment of rural economies. With increased regional governance capacity, California's rural places can adopt [Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies](#) that build on a strong tourism foundation to attract outdoor recreation-oriented businesses, nurture start-ups and retain talent.
- [Sustainable recreation](#) and [destination stewardship](#) are long-range planning tools that can mitigate negative impacts on communities with increasing visitation and population growth. Incorporating these tools alongside other sustainable growth strategies for general plans and community plans that can shape a new future for rural communities that protects natural resources, conserves public lands and open space, and manages visitors and residents with low-impact transportation and outdoor recreation infrastructure.
- Emerging approaches to environmental stewardship, such as [ecosystem services](#), create possibilities for new partnerships and alignment among advocacy groups. Outdoor recreation programs can leverage co-benefits from other natural resources in public lands and open space. Recreation advocates can expand their mission and partners to other areas of conservation and land protection. Similarly, conservation and environmental groups should consider recreation advocates for new partnerships to enhance the co-benefits of projects.

Appendices

Appendix A: Sustainable Advantage Interview Guide

FRAMING: ORGANIZATION INTERVIEWEE

Tell me a little about you and your organization and the key initiatives and projects your organization is involved in that address equitable or sustainable economic growth for small town and rural communities.

- In your view, what regional economic challenges are you trying to address in rural communities?
- What should the key strategies or goals be to address these challenges?

DEFINE THE REGION, RURAL DEVELOPMENT GOALS - OBJECTIVES

- How do you define the region you work in? What is the relationship between the rural small town and surrounding rural or metro areas in terms of governance and economic development?
- If a major goal is diversifying rural economies so they sustain a middle class, how are the most successful communities accomplishing this?
 - [PROBE:] What are the most innovative approaches / ideas that were uncovered / discovered in your research / projects AND / OR in the economies you have worked in / studied.

OUTDOOR RECREATION ECONOMIES (ORE) ORGANIZATIONS AND PARTNERS

- What is your conception or definition of an outdoor recreation economy?
- Are you engaged personally or have colleagues at your organization or partner organizations that are engaged in initiatives or projects to promote outdoor recreation, tourism, or related industries in rural areas?
 - What can you tell me about the projects?
- Who are key partners (or actors/players) who initiate or advance these projects?
 - Traditional?
 - New and innovative?
- What challenges-issues are you/they trying to overcome?
 - What are opportunities or success factors?
 - PROBE: How is success measured? Accounted for?
- Are you aware of others, towns or organizations that are working on outdoor recreation, tourism, or related industries initiatives?
 - What can you tell me about the projects?
 - Again, what challenges-issues are they trying to overcome?
 - What are the opportunities or success factors?
- Are there other key players that are important to engage along the way?
 - PROBE: Are there stakeholders who are often missed-left out in these projects or initiatives?
- Who are the stakeholders that have opportunity that may not be currently leveraging their potential?

- Forest Service district offices?
- Colleges and high schools?
- Civic organizations?
- Local elected officials?
- State senate or house representatives?
- Cal Fire?
- CA OES?
- Go Biz?
- Industry associations?

INITIATIVES, PROJECTS, POLICIES

- What key policies promote outdoor recreation, tourism, or related industries or related rural economic development that would be important to consider for toolkits (using in other regions)?
 - Local finance districts?
 - Federal or state grant programs?
 - Templates for community engagement?
 - Opportunity Zones
 - PBIDs
 - TOT or other districts
 - Tourism marketing campaigns
 - Outdoor gear-apparel cluster initiatives
 - Streamlined outfitter permitting?
- Are there other kinds of initiatives that you think are related or that are having a beneficial impact on small town / rural economies without directly promoting or advocating ORE?
 - Conservation / land protection initiatives?
 - Inclusive access - participation for under-represented groups?
 - Workforce dollars for transitioning industries?

CONTEXT FOR ORE

- Are the recent efforts to promote “outdoor recreation economies” or “offices of outdoor recreation” shortsighted, trendy, or just a fad? Should policy energy be on something else to help rural economies?
- Do you think there’s an opportunity to bring “unlikely allies,” whether politically or culturally, together, through ORE work?
 - Groups to protect land for hunting, fishing, kayaking, mountain biking, etc.?
 - Groups to promote tourism businesses?
 - Groups to create special finance districts to fund business or tourism efforts?

RESOURCES - CONTACTS

- Are there resources / reports, or other things I should be looking into?
 - Clearinghouses?
- Who (what organizations) should I be talking to?
 - Technical assistance orgs?

- Local or state elected officials?
 - Advocacy groups?
 - Agency leaders at the regional or state level?
- What forums or conferences would like to see presentations or reports on the findings from my research?
- What would you personally like to see emerge from the project I am conducting?
 - How would it benefit your organization or partners?
 - What would you like to see in a follow up / from the final product?

Appendix B: Sustainable Advantage Interviewees

Abigail Whittaker, Project Analyst, Center for Economic Development, Chico State University

Adam Livingston, Director of Planning and Policy, Sequoia Riverlands Trust

Bill Mueller, CEO, Valley Vision

Bob Kingman, Deputy Director, Sierra Nevada Conservancy

Carl Ribaud, President, SMG Consulting

Chris Mertens, Government Affairs Director, Sierra Business Council

Courtney Farrell, Project Manager, Geographical Information Center, Chico State University

David Shabazian, Program Manager, Rural-Urban Connections Strategy (RUCS), Sacramento Council of Governments (SACOG)

Devin Middlebrook, City Council Member, City of South Lake Tahoe; Sustainability Program Manager, Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA)

Garrett Villanueva, Regional Trails Coordinator, Southwest District, U.S. Forest Service

Heidi Hill Drum, CEO, Tahoe Prosperity Center

Jamie Orr, Co-Founder, Cowork Tahoe

Jesse Pasafiume, Executive Board Member, Sierra Buttes Trail Stewardship; Managing Partner, Lost Sierra Development, LLC

John Urdi, CEO, Mammoth Lakes Tourism

John Wentworth, Executive Director Mammoth Lakes Trails and Public Access, City Councilman, Town of Mammoth

Johnny Mohica, Project Director, Earth Economics

Katie Hawkins, Membership Development Manager, California Outdoor Recreation Partnership

Kyla Pascucci, Executive Administrator of Dirt Magic, Sierra Buttes Trail Stewardship

Laurel Harkness, Executive Director, Society for Outdoor Recreation Professionals; President, Siskiyou Outdoor Recreation Alliance

Niki Brown, Program Manager, Discover Siskiyou

Penny Leff, Statewide Agritourism Coordinator, Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (SAREP), University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources

Peter Owens, Senior Project Analyst, Center for Economic Development, Chico State University

Robert Tse, Senior Policy Advisor, Rural Development, Rural Utilities Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Roger Lee, CEO, Economic Development for Central Oregon (EDCO)

Scott MacGuire, President, The Mountain Lab

Steve Frisch, President, Sierra Business Council

Terrance Rodgers, Economic Development Program Officer, Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC)

Thad Walker, Conservation Projects Coordinator, Butte County Resource Conservation District

Tonya Dowse, CEO, Siskiyou Economic Development Council

Trish Kelly, Managing Director, Valley Vision

The title and affiliation given for each interviewee is from the date of the interview.

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Pender, John et. al. “Creating Rural Wealth: A new Lens for Rural Development Efforts.” U.S. Department of Agriculture, Amber Waves. September, 2012.

<https://greenlake.extension.wisc.edu/files/2012/11/Creating-Rural-Wealth-Economic-Research-Service.pdf>

The authors discuss the factors affecting the distribution of wealth, and the trends influencing development, among them nearness to metro regions, and natural resource amenities.

Rasker, Ray. “Protected Lands and Economics: A Summary of Research and Careful Analysis on the Economic Impacts of Protected Federal Lands.” Headwaters Economics. Spring, 2017.

https://headwaterseconomics.org/wp-content/uploads/Protected_Lands_Economics.pdf

The Headwaters report summarizes the body of research showing economic benefit from protected public lands including population, employment, and income. Professional and service-based industries are responsible for the positive measures.

Rasker, Ray. “West is Best: How Public Lands in the West Create a Competitive Economic Advantage.” Headwaters Economics. November, 2012.

https://headwaterseconomics.org/wp-content/uploads/West_Is_Best_Full_Report.pdf

Rasker’s report shows how professional service industries especially account for the positive economic indicators in rural counties in the West near federal public lands. Qualitative work shows how local communities use outdoor recreation to attract and retain businesses and talent.

Reeder, Richard and Dennis Brown. “Recreation, Tourism, and Rural Well-Being.” U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service (ERS), Economic Research Report Number 7. August, 2005.

https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/46126/15112_err7_1_.pdf?v=9540.7

The report finds that increased tourism and recreation correlates to increased well-being measured by employment, wages, poverty rates, education, and health. Housing costs are increased, and there is significant local variation in outcomes.

Rowland-Shea, Jenny. “Rural Pragmatism: Lessons Learned from the Colorado’s North Fork Valley.” Center for American Progress. April, 2018.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/reports/2018/04/11/449287/rural-pragmatism/>

The article outlines the North Fork’s transition from fossil fuels industries and makes recommendations that include an emphasis on outdoor recreation and increased public participation in planning processes to catalyze economic and community transformation.

Rowland-Shea, Jenny and Nicole Gentile. “Outdoor Recreation is Big Business.” Center for American Progress. September, 2017.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/reports/2017/09/27/439530/outdoor-recreation-big-business/>

The authors rank Western states according to consumer spending, state investment, youth participation, and outdoor access. They give Colorado and Washington A grades. California received a B.

Rowland-Shea, Jenny. “Policies to Boost State Outdoor Recreation Economies.” Center for American Progress. June, 2019.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/reports/2019/06/13/471058/policies-boost-state-outdoor-recreation-economies/>

The author follows the trend of states adopting offices of outdoor recreation and recommends a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion to improve access, creating new public outdoor recreation spaces, increasing access to state lands, improving stream access, improving public access across private lands, and reducing restrictions on coastal access. She also provides an overview of policy funding mechanisms (dedicated - Colorado lottery, California’s Prop 68), and licenses, taxes, and fees, and recommendations for federal funding and land protection.

Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG). “Rural-Urban Connections Strategy (RUCS).”

<https://www.sacog.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/rucs-booklet.pdf>

The RUCS booklet describes the data tool and engagement process for valuing rural and agricultural lands in the Sacramento region to maximize farm production value and compare agriculture use to other land use. RUCS takes an ecosystems services approach and emphasizes sustainability and valuation for land use decisions.

Sanford, Jill. “Outdoor Recreation Spurs Economic Growth, But . . .” *Outside Magazine*. May, 2019.

<https://www.outsideonline.com/2396515/outdoor-recreation-spurs-local-economic-growth>

The author reviews a Headwaters Economics report, and interviews the author, Megan Lawson, and Stacy Corless from Mono County, California.

Sierra Business Council. “Proposition 68 & the Sierra Nevada.”

https://sierrabusiness.org/images/docs/GOVT_Prop68_Sierra_Fact_Sheet_2018_02_09.pdf

The policy overview describes the funding categories and pass-through organizations.

Sonoma County Economic Development Board. “Outdoor Recreation Industry Report, 2018.”

<http://sonomaedb.org/Current-Projects/Outdoor-Recreation/>

The report combines a business and visitor survey with county economic impact analysis of recreation activities. The report also provides an overview of county recreation assets and plans for recreation infrastructure and events.

Stock, James and Jacob Bradt. “Analysis of Proposed 20-year Mineral Leasing Withdrawal in Superior National Forest.” Harvard Working Paper. June, 2019.

https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/stock/stock/snf_withdrawal_stock-bradt_updated_june_2019.pdf

The paper weighs proposed mining operations and effects on recreation and natural resource amenities finding deleterious outcomes from developing mining. The paper presents literature review of studies that indicate rural benefits from recreation and natural resource amenities (p.12).

Sustainable Forest Action Coalition and Center for Economic Development (CED), California State University, Chico. “Perceived Impacts of Forest Policy Change: 2016-2019 Business Survey Results.”

<https://forestcommunityresilience.org/#/documents>

The reports outline business survey results from regional geographies in California. The survey covered the importance and impact of the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) on local business and employment, views on USFS policies to recreational opportunities, views on USFS land management practices, and relationships with land managers.

Thomas, Catherine, et. al. “2018 National Park Visitor Spending Effects.” U.S. Geological Survey, National Park Service, 2018.

https://www.nps.gov/nature/customcf/NPS_Data_Visualization/docs/NPS_2018_Visitor_Spending_Effects.pdf

California’s national park and recreation area impacts--recreation visitation, spending, and jobs--lead the nation (p. 49).

Walls, Margaret. “The Outdoor Recreation Economy and Public Lands.” *Resources*. October, 2018.

<https://www.resourcesmag.org/archives/the-outdoor-recreation-economy-and-public-lands/>

Walls considers the implications are for public lands amid a growing interest in outdoor recreation economies and state offices of outdoor recreation. She discusses the history and contemporary context of outdoor recreation alongside natural resource policy.

White, Eric, et. al. “Federal Outdoor Recreation Trends: Effects on Economic Opportunities.” U.S. Department of Agriculture. November, 2016.

https://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/pubs/pnw_gtr945.pdf

The report offers data on participation by activity, economic impact analysis, and a summary of potential benefits to local economies from business and population growth. The report was prepared for the Interagency Federal Council on Outdoor Recreation.

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service (ERS). State Fact Sheets.

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/state-fact-sheets/>

The ERS provides data on key socioeconomic metrics comparing urban and rural counties by state. Income and education levels have risen for both rural and urban California, but rural California lags urban rates. On other measures, population, income, and poverty rates, rural California shows negative trends; urban California shows positive trends on these measures.

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service (ERS). “What is rural?”

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-classifications/what-is-rural/>

The ERS provides an overview definition of rural counties, “metro” and “non-metro.”

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service (ERS). “Rural America at a Glance, 2019 Edition.” Economic Information Bulletin, November 2019.

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/95341/eib-212.pdf?v=6634.6>

Isolated nonmetro rural counties lost population and employment between 2010 and 2018. Rural counties near metro areas saw increases in population and employment. But the rates are nowhere near the increases seen in the metropolitan counties which gained far more significant numbers in population and jobs. Rural counties are characterized by older populations and lower levels of educational attainment.

U.S. Forest Service. “A Framework for Sustainable Recreation.” USDA Recreation, Heritage, and Volunteer Resources. 2010

https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5346549.pdf

The strategy document outlines mission, vision, values, goals, and areas of focus based on triple bottom line approaches for communities experiencing impacts from use and visitation.

U.S. Department of the Interior. “Chapter 5: Public Conservation Lands and Rural Economic Growth.

The Department of the Interior’s Economic Contributions, Fiscal year 2011.” July, 2012.

https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/uploads/2011-Econ-Report-FINAL-07_27_2012.pdf

<https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/migrated/ppa/upload/Chapter-5.pdf>

The report claims that conservation (over extraction) does not produce negative economic outcomes for rural places.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Recreation Economy for Rural Communities program.

<https://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/recreation-economy-rural-communities>

The program provides technical assistance and grants for planning in rural communities for outdoor recreation projects to revitalize small town centers.

Appendix D: Author Bios

Aaron Wilcher is a practicing workforce and community development professional. He was a competitive cycling athlete for 13 years, and now rides for fun. He also is an avid backcountry skier. He holds master's degrees in city planning from UC Berkeley and American studies from Saint Louis University, and has taken courses in the Wilderness Education program at Lake Tahoe Community College and with the National Ski Patrol.

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Fran Doherty is a community development and real estate finance professional. She runs the west coast office for an investment management company. Outside of her professional endeavors, Fran is an avid mountain biker and helps run a 100-member competitive cycling club, Team Roaring Mouse. She also rock climbs and trail runs regularly. Fran holds a master's degree in community planning with a specialization in real estate finance from the University of Maryland.

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