

NH *Listens*

Carsey Institute at the
University of New Hampshire
NH.listens@unh.edu
www.nhlistens.org
603 862-2821

Bringing people together for
engaged conversations and
informed community solutions

Statewide Community Conversations on Outdoor Recreation in New Hampshire

Final Report

December 2011

Submitted to:

NH Office of Energy and Planning
NH Department of Resources and Economic Development

Project Team

Bruce Mallory, Director
Michele Holt-Shannon, Project Manager
Molly Donovan, Project Coordinator
Julie Tracy, Project Assistant

Introduction

The state of New Hampshire is required to maintain a comprehensive strategic plan that identifies critical needs for improving outdoor recreation and parks. This strategic plan is known as the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). The SCORP satisfies the requirement of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) that each state have an approved SCORP on file with the National Park Service (NPS) in order to participate in the LWCF program. It also fulfills the New Hampshire statutory requirement (RSA 12-A:18) that there be an outdoor recreation planning program. The SCORP must be reviewed every five years and completely updated every ten years. The next ten year plan is due to the National Park Service by 2013.

In anticipation of submitting the next SCORP, the NH Department of Resources and Economic Development (DRED) and the NH Office of Energy and Planning (OEP) decided to increase the quantity and quality of citizen input, to be sure that the Plan is based on the views, preferences, and needs of NH residents. This is a new dimension of the planning process, to extend opportunities for input beyond those who have traditionally been engaged in the SCORP process—those individuals and groups who have been frequent users of our parks and recreation facilities such as hikers, hunters, ATV users, fishermen, skiers, and others. For the next plan, DRED and OEP hoped to involve those residents who may not be part of organized groups or who may not be frequent users of parks and recreation facilities. In order to create a system of parks and outdoor recreation, DRED/OEP wanted to hear from a wide range of citizens—young and old, native Granite-staters and newcomers, city and rural residents, and those who come from all socioeconomic levels.

NH Listens is a civic engagement initiative of the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire which brings people together for engaged conversations and informed community solutions. NH Listens was retained by OEP and DRED to gather citizen input and to learn more about citizens' views on opportunities for outdoor recreation at the local and state level. The citizen input from the NH Listens sessions will be used by OEP and DRED in the 2013 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan.

The goal of these community conversations was to create an opportunity for citizens to share their thoughts on the challenges, opportunities, issues, and needs relating to local and state outdoor recreation. Special emphasis was placed on hearing citizen's views about unmet needs and innovative approaches to meeting those needs. While the community conversations were open to all, additional outreach was focused on those with limited use of outdoor recreation resources for reasons of access, age, income, or knowledge.

On October 5 and October 6, 2011, NH Listens facilitated small group dialogues at seven sites throughout the state of New Hampshire. A total of 171 community members participated in the conversations and shared their views on the challenges and needs of outdoor recreation at both the local and state levels.

Why dialogue and public engagement?

At a time when many citizens are feeling an increase in partisanship and a decrease in civility, the rules of typical public meetings are often ones that control dissent more than facilitate problem solving. Creating an opportunity for people to talk to each other constructively is a priority for the work of NH Listens. As noted in the 2010 Resource Guide for Public Engagement, *“these engagement techniques strengthen the traditionally distant relationship between citizens and government, mitigate conflict between groups, improve the quality of buy-in for public decisions, and tap into community assets and citizen potential.”*

The 171 people who participated in this project spent three and a half hours of their evening in a discussion about outdoor recreation. This is significant. We asked participants to share their values and experiences with outdoor recreation and to convey their top priorities for action.

Public deliberation is most constructive when differences of opinion are expressed. We work to bring a group of people together in a conversation that normalizes disagreement, encourages curiosity, and yet discourages personal attacks. It is significant that our overall summary of input contains both issues of overlapping concern and issues of unique differences.

When done well, these techniques create the space for real dialogue so everyone who shows up can tell their story and share their perspective on the topic at hand. Dialogue which engages the public can improve relationships, improve institutional decision making, increase civic capacity, and improve community problem solving.

How New Hampshire Listens Collects and Reports Citizen Recommendations

The work of New Hampshire Listens is based on small-group facilitated dialogue that produces specific outcomes, often in the form of concrete recommendations for action on the part of local or state government. Depending on the topic, the outcomes might be at a more general level, articulating broad sets of values or criteria for decision-making. Whether a dialogue is constructed as a one-time event that stretches over several hours or multiple events occurring over several weeks, participants typically move through a four-stage process guided by the facilitator. These stages include:

1. Introductions and personal stories about how participants relate to the focus topic of the dialogue (including their prior experiences with and opinions about the topic);
2. Review of the available data on the topic to assure common, comparable levels of knowledge among the participants
3. Analysis of the topic and its multiple dimensions, leading to selection by the group of a small number of key issues (3-4) that are seen as most important for discussion necessary for generating concrete actions or recommendations;

4. In-depth discussion of the selected key issues and articulation of a final set of views, values, or recommended actions directed at relevant decision-makers.

Throughout the dialogue, facilitators document the conversation and identify recurring statements or themes. That is, the information that is gleaned from each small group is inductively analyzed, moving from the specific comments made by group members to general statements that represent the shared sense of the group. Both agreements and disagreements are recorded, to assure that all points of view are heard and documented. Facilitators work with the group to draft final language reflecting areas of consensus or agreement. The group “owns” the final statements that emerge from this process.

In cases where multiple groups have met and discussed a common topic, the final statements from each group are collected and analyzed by NH Listens staff. Using inductive analytic procedures, similar to those that might be used in qualitative ethnographic research methods; we identify the most frequently stated findings or themes that cut across all groups. Particular finding or recommendations must be identified multiple times (depending on the number of small groups and participants involved) in order to be selected as a final, overarching finding that reflects all of the small group discussions. We do not report that “X number of participants said Y,” or “X number supported Y recommendation” because of our focus on group rather than individual outcomes. The analysis of small group notes and recommendations, clustering the individual group findings into common themes or statements, and generating overall recommendations is similar to that used in the analysis of focus group work, relying on the standards for rigor associated with qualitative social science research. Thus, the final products of citizen dialogue supported by NH Listens are qualitative, aggregated reports of the small group discussions and recommendations.

Framing Community Conversations

In conjunction with the staff at OEP and DRED, NH Listens developed a set of focus questions to guide the discussion on outdoor recreation. These questions were used as the basis for developing the framework for the community conversations.

NH Listens/SCORP Focus Questions

How can our outdoor recreation areas become the best places for everyone to experience the natural wonders of New Hampshire?

- Are there outdoor recreational opportunities for you in your community and throughout the state?
- What has been your experience in using NH’s outdoor recreation areas including local and state parks?
- What keeps you from using outdoor recreation areas?
- How can competing uses of outdoor recreation areas be managed to assure equal access and enjoyment (e.g., hiking or hunting, bird watching or off-road vehicle use?)

- How can people who don't often use our outdoor recreation areas be encouraged to take advantage of them? What groups of people seem to you to be least likely to use outdoor recreation areas including state parks? Why?
- Think of a park or recreation area, either in NH or somewhere else, that you have especially enjoyed. What was it about that place that should be copied in other parks and outdoor recreation areas?

What improvements would you like to see in local and state outdoor recreation areas?

- Are your outdoor recreational interests being met by local and state areas, parks, and facilities?
- What do you think are the most important parts of outdoor recreation areas to preserve?
- What does not currently exist at our outdoor recreation areas that you would like to see added?
- What would make it easier for you and your neighbors to travel to and use outdoor recreation areas?
- How can outdoor recreation areas be designed to serve specific groups such as people with disabilities, recent immigrants, youth, seniors, and low-income families?

How can state and local outdoor recreation areas help all of us, young and old, natives and newcomers, be healthy and fit?

- What kinds of activities, services, and facilities can be offered to reduce obesity and increase fitness?
- How do we convince young people that playing and exploring outdoors is at least as fun as playing video games and texting their friends?
- How can outdoor recreation facilities partner with schools, community recreation centers, and programs like Scouts, church groups, and others to enhance outdoor experiences?

Who should pay to keep outdoor recreation areas open and functioning? Are you willing and able to pay more for the use of state parks and recreation facilities?

- What kinds of services or facilities would you be willing to pay (more) for, and what would you not pay (more) for?

Participant Recruitment

NH Listens used a variety of methods to recruit participants for the sessions. A database of community contacts was developed with special focus on those who had clients or constituents working with the elderly, youth, new immigrant groups, the physically disabled, and those working to connect health, obesity, and recreation. The database included local recreation departments; high schools; regional planning commissions; senior centers; health agencies; disability groups and those working with new immigrant groups. These contacts were sent a

package of information about the community conversations asking for their participation. Each group was also sent a series of electronic newsletters to inform them of the event and offer an easy access to registration. Members of the NH Listens staff personally reached out to contacts throughout the state to encourage participation from the general public and targeted groups.

A press release was issued and the community conversations received print and online media coverage around the state. There was coverage from Associated Press, Boston.com, New Hampshire.com, Union Leader, Concord Monitor, WMUR, Seacoastonline.com, Newhampshirenews.com, and Heraldglobe.com. In addition, organizations across the state publicized the event on their websites, Facebook posts, and electronic newsletters.

Participants

NH Listens had a goal of recruiting 120 participants across the state. There was much interest in the topic and over 170 community members came to the sessions. Participants were asked to register for the community conversations so NH Listens could anticipate the number of facilitators needed. Registration was completed online or via telephone. Participants were asked a series of questions through the registration process. Registrants were not required to answer every question. At each site not all registrants attended and walk in participants were welcomed. Below is information about the registrants.

There were a total of 171 registrants. Of those who pre-registered and filled out the registration questions, 105 were female and 60 were male. Of those who reported their age, 69% of registrants were between 45 and 65 years old; 16% were between 31 and 44 years old; 11% were over 65 years old and 4% were under 30 years old.

When asked do you use outdoor recreation facilities:

Yes: 152

No: 4

Number of registrants who use outdoor facilities

Daily 11
 Weekly 50
 Monthly 32
 Several times a year 56

Locations	Registrants	Participants
North Country: Berlin White Mountains Community College Berlin, NH 03570	29	29
Seacoast Region: Portsmouth Portsmouth Library Portsmouth, NH 03801	41	26

Monadnock Region: Keene Keene Parks and Recreation Keene, NH 03431	23	22
White Mountains Region: North Conway Conway Library Conway, NH 03818	5	9
Merrimack Valley Region: Manchester Unitarian Universalist Church of Manchester Manchester, NH	48	31
Dartmouth/Lake Sunapee Region: West Lebanon Kilton Public Library West Lebanon, NH 03784	9	10
Lakes Region: Laconia Laconia Senior Center Laconia, NH 03246	16	43

The outreach was successful in terms of the overall number of participants. There was large turn out from those who have a strong interest or participation in outdoor recreation but may not be associated with a recreation stakeholder group (recreation businesses, recreation educators, local recreation interests, clubs, groups etc.) There was a great deal of interest from those involved in equestrian activities across the state. Representatives of equestrian interests registered for each site and participated in Keene, Portsmouth, Manchester, and Laconia.

What did participants discuss?

Each discussion group consisted of 9-12 participants, led by a trained facilitator. The dialogues ran for about three and half hours each, moving through the five phases summarized below.

Introductions and Initial Concerns and Questions:

The first part of the conversation allowed everyone to get to know each other better, develop some basic group agreements to assure a productive conversation, and gain a general sense of initial concerns and questions regarding our topic. We have found it is important to give time to understanding how participants are *personally connected to the topic*.

Information and Data Analysis:

In this part of the conversation, participants reviewed relevant data and information about parks and outdoor recreation in NH. We provided data and information to help provide a context for the conversation so that participants

were informed yet not overwhelmed with data. In this part of the conversation, participants are asked to focus on *what matters to them and what they notice* about the information.

Key Issues and Priorities:

After discussion and responses to the information provided, the group brainstormed a list of *key issues and priorities* that participants most wanted to discuss in depth. Once named and grouped into themes, each group selected 2 or 3 key topics to explore in greater depth.

Topics in Focus:

Each group explored the chosen topics in depth. Initially, participants were asked to name all of the *critical aspects to the topic* (define the problem, what are the barriers, what is working, what others might see as the issue?) At the end of discussing each key topic, groups began to identify areas of interest for *recommended action*.

Final Recommendations:

During this final part of the conversation, the participants were asked to identify key recommendations and action steps related to topics in focus. The goal was for participant groups to end with 2-4 *concrete, feasible action statements*.

Findings

NH Listens collected data and transcribed it for each session site. We also surveyed all participants about their experience of the process and received 122 responses back. The findings below are a compilation of the data. The discussions at some sites included local issues and concerns such as economic development in the North Country and oceanfront/beach issues on the Seacoast.

How people are personally connected to the outdoors

Most participants came to the sessions because they have a strong connection to the outdoors through one or more recreational activities. Participants put a high value on having access to outdoor recreation, open space, and nature. They simply value “being outside.” Often noted was the solitude of being outside and others noted the social aspect of outdoor recreation. There was a desire and commitment to have natural areas permanently protected so future generations might enjoy them. Participants indicated that natural beauty helped to define the state. A common theme when participants talked about their connection to outdoor recreation was a concern for getting children and youth--the next generation--to use the outdoors for recreation purposes. Preserving outdoor recreation areas for future generations was often described as of very high importance.

Key issues and priorities for participants

The data from all sites indicates that participants across the state identified similar key issues and priorities for outdoor recreation. The key topical areas identified by participants fell into the following unranked categories.

- Partnerships
- Stewardship
- Multiple Use of recreation lands
- Education
- Need for Information
- Volunteers
- Access
- Funding
- Youth and Children

All participant groups discussed these key issues and priorities at length. Below, a summary of those discussions is presented, along with key recommendations which the participant groups finalized at the end of their respective sessions.

Partnerships

Participants put a high value on the importance of partnerships, collaboration, and cooperation. This was described as partnerships among user groups; local and state entities; within state departments dealing with lands and recreation; towns, schools, and local organizations; government entities and the business community, federal government, state government, and private conservation groups. Partnerships are viewed as a way to strengthen resources and limit conflict.

Partnerships – Recommendations

- Seek out partnerships to combine resources, talents, and knowledge
- Look to create and strengthen local and state partnerships
- View private sector and business as partners
- Do not duplicate roles and services but create partnerships to enhance access and programming
- Forming partnerships will help provide access for multiple use of lands
- State should take lead in developing partnerships

Stewardship

Stewardship is seen as a critical issue now and into the future. There is concern about resources, both human and financial, for the future stewardship and maintenance of outdoor recreation lands and facilities. There is a strong sense that long-term plans for stewardship must be in place. This plan must include priorities. The use of volunteers was discussed by most participant groups in connection with on-going and long-term stewardship of state and local recreation, open space, and natural lands. There is concern about whether there will be volunteer stewards in the future if the next generation (youth) are not interested, acclimated, or comfortable in the outdoors. Identifying funding for stewardship is seen as a priority.

Stewardship Recommendations

- Create a long range, prioritized plan to maintain facilities
- Develop stewardship plans which address sustainability
- Have a public list of maintenance issues which need to be addressed
- Identify who is responsible for maintenance of recreation land and facilities and ensure they have the proper resources
- Create a state trail signage system which is uniform
- All trail designs should be sustainable and have dedicated volunteers for stewardship
- State should organize trail groups, create partnerships for trail maintenance
- Create endowments for stewardship of outdoor recreation lands and facilities
- Create a “friends” group for each recreation site

Multiple Uses

The issue of multiple uses of land was listed as a key topic at each discussion site. There appeared to be support for multiple uses but the need for better coordination, information sharing, partnership development, and understanding among user groups was stressed. The need for cooperation was stressed by some groups and the need for some dedicated, single use space was stressed by some participants.

Multiple Use Recommendations

- Increase access for all users
- There should be comprehensive information which is easy to access
- Find a comfortable balance of uses that respects the land
- Think strategically about multiple uses in an area
- Address the environmental impact and safety concerns with multiple users
- Establish a code of conduct
- Look at how other states handle multiple use issues and conflicts

- Consider “user days” in specific parks for single use
- Create a map to indicate uses in each area and on each trail

Education

The need for education was discussed in each participant group. According to participants, education should focus on youth and parents, recreation users, and private property owners. It was stressed that many organizations currently focus on environmental education and that these resources should be utilized. Education was also closely linked with developing partnerships - especially with local schools and environmental/conservation organizations. Education was also noted as important among different user groups to help each group understand the other. Education in general is seen as a way to ensure the future appreciation of outdoor recreation.

Education Recommendations

- Include outdoor recreation education in school curriculum
- Develop education program partnership with Scouts, church groups, and parents
- Work with existing programs on environmental literacy
- Provide more information to foster community collaborations for outdoor recreation programs
- Provide landowner liability information to private landowners
- Develop an education program for users to understand their personal responsibility while outdoors
- Host a state sponsored user education day
- Create education materials to address safety issues and required skills for outdoor recreation
- Address the risk aversion of parents to letting kids be outdoors
- Post trail etiquette and rules at all recreation locations
- Provide education on diverse interests and uses of recreation lands
- Incorporate history into educational materials
- Create multiple avenues for education such as signage, online tutorials, television, radio, printed, internet, and social media
- Stress resource protection in materials

Information

The need for more information from the state on all aspects of outdoor recreation was talked about at each site. Many participants noted that they lacked access to information on specific

outdoor recreation areas, programs, and issues. Many were aware of the state websites but had further recommendations about the content.

Information Recommendations

- Update the state website and make it interactive
- Maintain networks through Facebook
- Create a website that is for all state recreation areas regardless of agency – centralize all information – by region or use (better linking across agencies)
- Create a resource page on partnerships and potential partnerships
- Improve the maps on the website for easier use; Include trail maps
- Maintain kiosks at each recreation area with maps and user responsibility
- Better publicize parking information for recreation sites
- Better promote recreation opportunities to NH residents
- Provide a statewide trail inventory
- Use the website to list clubs and user groups contact information
- Volunteer opportunities and recognition should be on website

Volunteers

The importance of existing volunteers and the need for volunteers in the future was a recurring theme. Most groups cited the need for more volunteers, especially among young people. There is a deep concern that the existing volunteer support system will not be maintained unless outreach is done to the next generation of volunteers.

Volunteer Recommendations

- Recognize volunteers
- Give volunteers a free annual pass to recreation areas
- Organize volunteer groups and give them dedicated areas to maintain
- Use volunteers to educate users
- Link High School volunteer programs to recreation areas
- Use college and university students as a source of new volunteers
- Have an annual day of volunteering to clean up parks

Access

Access was discussed throughout the community conversations. Access was presented as meaning a number of different things. Providing access for all users was a common theme. The participants were concerned about access to private lands from landowners, easier access for

seniors and the disabled population, access related to fee structure, providing access close to home and work, access for parking and connections with public transportation, and ensuring permanent access to outdoor recreation lands.

Access Recommendations

- Ensure access for future generations – for all users
- Ensure access for seniors and the disabled
- Ask for more participation from private landowners to expand access
- Provide landowner liability information to landowners
- Encourage towns and cities to dedicate more lands to outdoor recreation
- Provide more parking to access outdoor recreation
- Ask existing recreation groups where to increase access
- Incorporate recreation into transportation corridors (bike, walk)
- Have access to all parks by paying for a universal pass
- Work to keep parks open year round
- Provide landowner liability information to keep lands open
- Support legislation that would permanently guarantee access
- Help community businesses recognize the economic value of access

Funding

Current funding and future funding were tied into each key issue and priority. Participants were fully aware of the state financial situation and expressed concern for outdoor recreation. Recommendations on how to address funding were varied. There is significant concern about having sufficient funding for the future and a concern about lack of funding impacting users' outdoor experiences. Below is a list of recommendations from participants.

Funding Recommendations

- Need targeted, adequate funding source for existing resources
- Need a state policy on the role of private companies in supporting recreation areas, especially for naming rights
- Create ownership and sponsorship opportunities
- Create reasonable fee structure and publicize
- Look to “alternative” funding such as philanthropy, events, estate planning
- Enlist retailers to support outdoor recreation
- Create an annual pass to be used like an ez-pass
- Use volunteers to offset cost of stewardship

- Waive fees for volunteers
- Set user fees for in state and out of state visitors
- Educate users so funds do not have to be spent on search and rescue
- Add food, vendors, merchandise as source of revenue
- Everyone should pay
- Have a dedicated sports equipment fee to go to operations and stewardship or have fee when residents buy boots
- Ticket cars in non-designated parking areas as a source of revenue
- Let public know what fees are being used for
- Balance funds for large parks and small parks
- Set incentives for business to increase access to lands and lakes
- Set specific funds aside for facilities, not just lands
- Need adequate tax structure to support parks

Children and Youth

There is much concern that children and youth are losing touch with the outdoors. This has been reflected in the stewardship, education, information, and volunteer sections of these key issues and priorities. Most participants who talked about children and youth expressed this as a value – “it is just the right thing for kids to know and love the outdoors.” The link between good health and outdoor recreation was also noted. There was concern about the lack of value the next generation of leaders may have for the outdoors if they have not had experiences as youth.

Children and Youth Recommendations

- Explore getting young people outdoors as a leadership development opportunity
- Link with schools and school boards
- Educate parents on the importance (and safety) of being outdoors
- Use social media to get them outdoors and let them use technology outdoors/don't let them use technology outdoors

Regional and Interest Group Differences

The outdoor recreation conversation was largely framed as statewide and the information listed previously notes all *frequent and significant findings* across sites and groups. In addition, there were a few conversations where participants shared feedback on local issues of concern. As numbers are lower in each local venue, it is more difficult to identify the level of significance. However, the following topics were mentioned locally.

North Country: Berlin (39 participants)

- Participants want to be sure the concerns of upstate are not always mixed in with concerns of downstate.
- Economic development as a key priority in recreation issues.

Seacoast Region: Portsmouth (26 participants)

- Concerns specific to seacoast and beach areas.
- Concerns about Hampton beach needing more diversity of users, mostly teenagers,

Monadnock Region: Keene (22 participants)

- Friends of Pisgah is a model that should be used in other parks; Some noted that Pisgah is the biggest park but not well supported; there is very little access to paths, restrooms; and viewpoints for people with disabilities.
- There was Interest in increased trails for equine use.

White Mountains Region: North Conway (9 participants)

- NA

Merrimack Valley Region: Manchester (31 participants)

- Equestrian concerns included a lack of support for equestrian use on trails and in public parks; lack of understanding about equestrian use and its impact; lack of facilities and parking space, and lack of understanding of the positive economic impact from the equestrian community.

Dartmouth/Lake Sunapee Region: West Lebanon (10 participants)

- NA

Lakes Region: Laconia (43 participants)

- Participants and individual e-mails mentioned concerns about a private yacht club seeking permission to build a club house at Ellacoya state park in Gilford
- Equine concerns noted at this site similar to those at Manchester site.
- Concerns for water quality standards for sewage during big events, such as Fish Derby.

Conclusion

The NH Listens SCORP project represented a vigorous outreach effort in order to give citizens across the state an opportunity to share their thoughts on outdoor recreation. The strong response from the public to participate at NH Listen conversation sessions was higher than planned. Final evaluations from participants and facilitators indicated that they rated the experience as positive and stated that the most important issues were addressed in the design. Participants also indicated that they increased their knowledge and understanding of issues related to outdoor recreation and that they had an increased understanding of the points of view of others. The experience of the conversations and the substance of the conversations is something participants feel will have a positive impact on outdoor recreation in the future. There was great interest from participants to see the results of the conversations state-wide and be informed about how the recommendations will be reflected in the 2013-2018 SCORP.

Key issues and priorities were easily identified and common across the state. The key issues and priorities from participants include:

- The need for **partnerships** among users and providers in outdoor recreation
- The importance of **stewardship** of existing facilities and recreation lands
- The support of and need for management of **multiple users** of recreation lands
- The need for **education** of users, the general public, potential users, and landowners
- The importance of **volunteers** and the need to increase volunteerism
- Ensuring **access** for all users, including to private lands where allowed
- An overall concern for the lack of **funding** now and in the future for outdoor recreation
- The importance of providing outdoor recreation opportunities for **children and youth**

Outdoor recreation is an important issue in the state. The public has strong connections to outdoor facilities and lands used for outdoor recreation and, therefore, have a stake in future plans. Outdoor recreation supporters would like to see an expansion and strengthening of outdoor recreation opportunities and resources to benefit residents, visitors, communities, economic development, and future generations.

NH Listens expects that the topics, priorities, and recommendations from NH citizens that emerged from the community dialogues will be incorporated into the 2013 SCORP planning process and documentation.