

Sustainable Advantage

Outdoor Recreation and Community Development in Rural California

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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.

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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