

LAKE TAHOE DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP PLAN

Introduction

Tahoe's growing popularity as an outdoor destination is impacting the Lake Tahoe-Truckee Region's (Region) iconic environment. This popularity is raising questions about the resilience of the Region given current visitation levels. Issues such as traffic congestion, litter, overcrowding, equitable access, public safety, and wildfire are worsening and beginning to threaten the environmental, social, and economic well-being of the Region. Climate change and a national surge in outdoor recreation are amplifying these issues even further. As a result, Tahoe land managers, destination management organizations, businesses, and public agencies have come together to begin creating a Destination Stewardship Plan (Plan). The partners aim to address the Region's travel demand, protect the environment, and meet the needs of residents and visitors.

Background

Lake Tahoe's iconic beaches, snow-covered mountains, vast forests, and famously clear blue waters have attracted visitors from across the globe for decades. Today, Lake Tahoe's proximity to major California and Nevada cities makes it a popular destination for millions of people seeking some of the best outdoor recreation opportunities in the world. In 2019, the Region saw a peak 14.1 million annual visitor days,¹ which is nearly three times more than Yosemite National Park's busiest year.² The Region's high visitation rate results in \$4.56 billion in annual tourism-related spending (62 percent of the Region's overall economy) and supports 74,900 jobs.³

Multiple studies project the Region's popularity as an outdoor destination to continue increasing due to climate change and the surging popularity of outdoor recreation nationally. The Tahoe Science Advisory Council has already documented a correlation between hot temperatures in nearby cities and increased visitation to Lake Tahoe as people seek refuge from the heat. In addition, the Outdoor Industry Association reports

¹ Ribaldo, C., Moffett, J., Hetz, T. (2022). *A Changing Tourism and Outdoor Recreation Landscape in the Lake Tahoe Region: A Situation Analysis*. Center for Responsible Travel et al.

² National Parks Service. *Annual Park Recreation Visits (1906 – Last Calendar Year)*. U.S. Department of the Interior. <https://tinyurl.com/53uhnbdp>

³ Baseline Report for the Tahoe Basin: Living and Working Today In and Around the Basin. (2021). *Tahoe Prosperity Center*. Retrieved from: https://tahoeprosperity.org/wp-content/uploads/TPC-Report_Sept-2021_Web.pdf

record levels of new and returning participants in outdoor recreation activities in 2021, adding to a 26 percent overall increase in outdoor recreation participation since the pandemic began.

An increasing number of visitors is not the only factor contributing to issues such as overcrowding, traffic congestion, and equitable access at Lake Tahoe. The rise of remote work means more people have moved to the Region and has contributed to rising housing costs. As a result, new permanent residents are accessing nearby recreation destinations in addition to visitors and longtime residents. Workers, pushed out of the area due to rising housing costs, often need to commute farther to their jobs. Such factors are increasing regional traffic congestion and sparking concerns over equitable access as working-class people are forced outside the Region.

At the same time, the State of California recognizes too many Californians do not have access to the State's public parks, beaches, and outdoor spaces. Because of this, the California Natural Resources Agency's Outdoors for All initiative focuses on equitably expanding outdoor access to all Californians through investments in open space infrastructure and outdoor programming.

Access concerns exist at Tahoe even though 86 percent of the Lake Tahoe Basin (Basin) is publicly owned. Many low-income and underrepresented residents face significant economic, cultural, or physical barriers to accessing Basin public lands and many Californians lack the resources to make it to Lake Tahoe at all. The California Tahoe Conservancy (Conservancy) is supporting the Outdoors for All initiative through grants designed to expand access for underserved people, increasing accessibility to Conservancy-owned lands, and aligning regional planning efforts—such as developing the Plan—with California's Outdoors for All goals.

Current Status

Beginning in the first year of the pandemic, the Lake Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program Sustainable Recreation Working Group, led by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA), began convening regular meetings with regional land managers, local governments, destination management organizations, businesses, and nonprofits. The purpose of these meetings was to discuss near-term visitor and destination management solutions to issues caused by changing visitor patterns during the pandemic.

Recognizing the value of collaborating with such a broad group of stakeholders, the TRPA earlier this year launched a planning process to establish a shared vision and long-term roadmap for destination stewardship at Lake Tahoe. Destination stewardship is a term being widely adopted in other resort and natural environment destinations around the globe. The group organized to develop the Plan aims to establish a holistic approach to visitor and user management so that the needs of the environment,

businesses, visitors, and local community are met in a harmonious way. Fifteen partners, including the Conservancy, came together to work with a team of consultants to guide the development of the Plan.

The planning process has included public workshops, resident and visitor surveys, sector-based stakeholder focus groups, group member interviews, and scenario-based modeling. Several themes have emerged during this process, and are summarized in the Situation Analysis,⁴ including:

1. Many stakeholders believe the Region must take immediate action on urgent issues such as housing and workforce shortages, transportation, trash, parking, and wildfire mitigation and evacuation strategies.
2. Only 29 percent of residents believe the positive benefits of tourism and recreation outweigh the negative impacts.
3. Tahoe is not seen as a welcoming place for all visitors according to data from a visitor survey.
4. Spanish-speaking residents expressed the need for more regional cultural competency, through actions such as printing materials in both English and Spanish.
5. Stakeholders support efforts to make sure the Basin is accessible and welcoming for all.
6. Vacation home rentals are unpopular among residents but increasingly popular for visitors.
7. Overall visitor satisfaction is very high with 90 percent of visitors saying they would recommend Lake Tahoe as a vacation destination.

Throughout the planning process the Conservancy and others have emphasized the importance of including goals and strategies to expand equitable access to the Region while carefully considering how new strategies, such as reservation systems, can be implemented equitably to prevent new barriers from emerging. The Conservancy has also emphasized the need to consider climate change impacts, such as wildfire risk, extreme weather, and fluctuating lake levels, when developing stewardship messaging and other likely Plan elements. In addition, Conservancy staff has identified ways for the Plan to complement many of the State's Outdoors for All strategic pillars, including reducing financial barriers, fostering belonging, empowering communities, and enhancing connectivity.

Next Steps

The effort will culminate in the release of the draft Plan in the next one to two months. Partners expect the Plan to include recommendations for goals and strategies focused on long-term collaboration and decision-making; regional stewardship messaging;

⁴ Ribaldo, C., Moffett, J., Hetz, T. (2022). *A Changing Tourism and Outdoor Recreation Landscape in the Lake Tahoe Region: A Situation Analysis*. Center for Responsible Travel et al.

equitable access; managing traffic, congestion, parking, and trailheads; and creating a tourism economy that delivers community benefits.

The Conservancy will use the Plan to help evaluate grant applications and inform land management decisions, such as efforts to increase Americans with Disabilities Act accessibility and improve wayfinding and interpretive signage. The Conservancy will also use the Plan to guide communications initiatives, such as those related to environmental stewardship. Finally, the Conservancy will consider the Plan when developing its 2024-2028 Strategic Plan.

A presentation from TRPA staff will provide additional information on the destination stewardship planning effort.

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