

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES ON RECREATION IN THE BLACKFOOT WATERSHED

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Photo: Glacier Country Tourism



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Rural communities within the Blackfoot Watershed are balancing the complexities of conservation, recreation, and economic change. With the rise in outdoor recreation tourism, these communities, alongside their agency partners, face the challenge of adapting to an unpredictable future. Decades of previous collaboration coordinated through the Blackfoot Challenge have set the stage for community-led recreation planning. This report outlines a community engagement process conducted by a team of facilitators from the University of Montana during 2024-25.

PURPOSE

The goal of this project was to engage communities and stakeholders within the Blackfoot Watershed to:

- Gather input on recreation-related issues and concerns
- Identify and map key areas of concern and areas of high recreation value
- Develop vision statements within communities for the watershed
- Identify some options and considerations of actions that can help achieve the goals of watershed

METHODS

The community engagement process was divided into three phases: **1) Community Engagement Meetings**, **2) Visioning Workshop**, and **3) Priorities for Action Workshop**. Online surveys were made available to those unable to attend. Each phase built on the previous one, occurring from September to December 2024.

- 1. Community Engagement Meetings** were organized in six communities: Potomac/Greenough, Seeley Lake, Lincoln, Ovando, Bonner, and Helmville. Held in accessible venues, these meetings catalyzed community engagement around outdoor recreation. Participants engaged in small group discussions about the importance of outdoor recreation, issues and concerns, opportunities for expansion, areas for limitation, and external impact. Insights gathered informed the following workshop.
- 2. The Visioning Workshop** took place at Lubrecht Experimental Forest. Community members from across the Watershed came together to draft a vision statement for outdoor recreation. They also began to map key areas of concern and areas of high recreation value. Participants worked in small groups to identify key vision statement themes and to connect these themes to specific locations in the watershed. Key themes from this workshop were used to draft vision statements for the final workshop.
- 3. The Priorities for Action Workshop**, was held at Ovando Elementary School. Community members from across the Watershed came together to identify and prioritize potential actions to address recreation challenges. Participants ranked draft vision statements and discussed potential improvements. Workshop participants then worked in small groups to discuss challenges and categorize proposed actions by effort and impact.

RESULTS

Recreation Issues and Concerns

Community members in the Blackfoot Watershed emphasized how outdoor recreation is important to their way of life, the ongoing legacy of natural resource stewardship, and the local economy. Community members also highlighted a range of concerns regarding the negative effects of outdoor recreation and tourism, including the following issues:

- Impacts to fisheries, natural resources, and wildlife
- Impacts to recreational experience
- Behavior and etiquette of recreationists
- Infrastructure and enforcement
- Impacts to community and local culture
- Traffic and safety challenges
- Tensions between recreation types and with communities
- Policies and permits
- Problems associated with outfitters

Draft Vision Statement

Community members shared keywords and phrases to shape a vision statement for outdoor recreation in the Watershed. No single term was universally chosen, so similar concepts were grouped into themes: Sustainability, Balance; Resource Protection, Stewardship; Clean, Healthy, Connected Watershed; Adaptive and Dynamic Management, Strategic Planning; and Way of Life, Community Vitality, Supporting Livelihoods. These key themes informed the following draft vision statement, which was revised by workshop participants.

To sustain a clean, connected, and biodiverse Blackfoot Watershed, protect and steward natural resources, and strengthen our rural community through adaptive recreation planning, management, and education.

Community Identified Actions: Community members proposed actions to address recreation issues and concerns, discussing feasibility and generating new ideas.

Key community recommendations included:

- **Enforcement:** Strengthen regulation and enforcement, such as fishing rules and permits for rafters and out-of-state visitors. Emphasize the need for more enforcement staff to ensure compliance.
- **Education and Training:** Address negative impacts through education, training guides in stewardship, and broader visitor education. Use media, slogans, and in-person programs to promote responsible behavior and highlight local culture.
- **Infrastructure:** Improve facilities by expanding bathrooms, enhancing access sites, and upgrading campgrounds. Install traffic signs and flashing lights for safer driving.
- **Hosts/Ambassadors:** Create ambassador programs for campgrounds and river access points, potentially using volunteers to manage high-use areas.
- **Communication:** Enhance communication between communities and agencies to streamline reporting and improve community engagement in decision-making.
- **Funding Capacity:** Increase funding through strategies like a tourism tax and reallocating bed tax funds to support enforcement, education, and infrastructure improvements.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Establishing a Collective Vision:** Communities highlighted key elements for a recreation vision statement, which can complement the broader Blackfoot Challenge vision. Staff and working groups should refine this statement to align with the core values of both the Blackfoot Challenge and the communities. This vision can underpin strategic plans and work plans, ensuring collaborative actions align with overarching goals.
- **Mapping Priorities:** Participants identified numerous challenges and began to prioritize actions. Blackfoot Challenge staff should spatially and temporally map potential actions, considering short- and long-term planning, effort, and impact.
- **Targeted Engagement:** While the community engagement process aimed to be as inclusive as possible, additional targeted outreach is needed for underrepresented stakeholders, including Tribal Nations, broader communities in Helmville and Lincoln, and specific recreation groups like biking and snowmobiling.
- **Assessing Actions with Federal and State Agencies:** Although potential actions were identified, further review with agency partners is necessary to assess feasibility. Organizing a workshop with agency representatives and appointing two contacts per agency can ensure ongoing collaboration during transition.
- **Adapting Successful Strategies:** Some proposed actions, like the ambassador program, have been successful elsewhere. Once priorities are set, the Blackfoot Challenge should consult other river groups to learn from their experiences.
- **Leveraging Stewardship and Education Resources:** Existing resources, such as the Glacier Country Destination Stewardship Plan, can educate tourists and new residents. The Blackfoot Challenge can ensure consistent messaging and collaborate with the University of Montana on signs and interpretive programs.
- **Facilitating Regular Communication:** Communities expressed eagerness to engage with the Blackfoot Challenge. To enhance communication, appoint two representatives from each community to join a working group or form a new group to meet quarterly, ensuring clear information channels.

INTRODUCTION

In response to increasing outdoor recreation pressure, rural communities and their agency partners across the Blackfoot Watershed have been challenged to balance supporting communities as they navigate economic transition and uncertainty, sustaining high-quality recreation opportunities and conserving the natural resources upon which those recreation opportunities depend. This report synthesizes a comprehensive community engagement process and presents the voices of community members from across the Watershed. This report acts not only as a synthesis but also as a jumping-off point for collaborative decision-makers to reflect on the past, co-create a vision for the future, and take collective action to fulfill the vision for managing outdoor recreation, supporting communities, and enhancing natural resource conservation.

BACKGROUND

The Blackfoot Watershed comprises 1.5 million acres at the southern end of the Crown of the Continent Ecosystem. From headwaters on the Continental Divide east of Lincoln, the Blackfoot River flows west to its confluence with the Clark Fork River at Bonner. The Watershed is renowned for its natural beauty and rich biological diversity, including charismatic grizzly bears, gray wolves, Canada lynx, wolverines, trumpeter swans, and sandhill cranes. The waters of the Blackfoot River and its tributaries provide critical habitat for bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout, contributing to the Watershed's reputation as a world-famous fly-fishing destination. From the rivers and lakes to the ridgetops, the Watershed nourishes forests, fish, wildlife, agriculture, and diverse recreational opportunities.

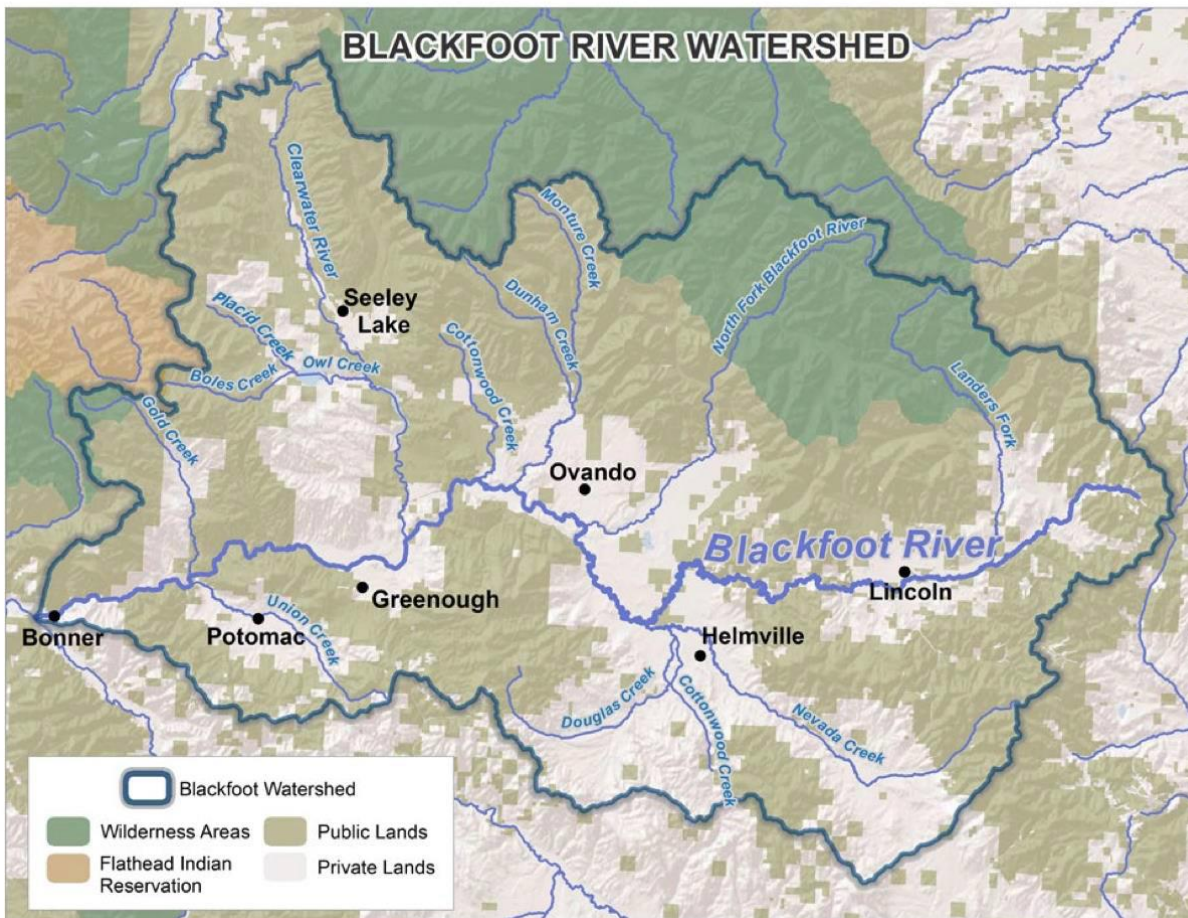


Figure 1. Map of Communities in the Blackfoot Watershed

Credit: Amy Pearson, The Nature Conservancy

The communities of Lincoln, Seeley Lake, Bonner, Ovando, Greenough, Potomac, and Helmville call the Blackfoot Watershed home (Figure 1). Compared to the increasingly urban cities of Helena to the east and Missoula to the west, communities in the Watershed support diverse rural livelihoods and encompass unique local culture. Conservation initiatives within the Blackfoot Watershed are robust and community-driven, bolstered by a collaborative partnership between landowners, local businesses, state and federal agencies, and non-profit organizations. This collaborative partnership facilitates open and ongoing dialogue essential for addressing diverse challenges and maximizing opportunities across the Watershed.

The origins of the Blackfoot Challenge stretch back to the 1970s when local landowners along the Blackfoot River identified a critical need to work with public land agencies to address natural resource issues at the intersection of public and private lands. These landowners and public land managers recognized that they could accomplish more collectively than individually. This collaborative effort laid a foundation for what would eventually become the Blackfoot Challenge.

By the early 1990s, legacies of unsustainable mining, forestry, and agricultural practices were threatening the health of the Watershed. Emerging threats included ranch subdivision and the spread of invasive weeds from increasing recreation. Through one-on-one conversations and community meetings, local leaders heard a need for collaborative management at the Watershed scale. Consequently, the Blackfoot Challenge was formally established in 1993 to take a “ridge-to-ridge” approach to community-based conservation in the Watershed.

The Blackfoot Challenge's mission is to coordinate efforts to conserve and enhance natural resources and the rural way of life in the Blackfoot watershed for present and future generations.

The Blackfoot Challenge is governed by a volunteer Board of Directors. Recognizing the mosaic of land tenure in the watershed, the Blackfoot Challenge brings together private landowners, local businesses, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and an alphabet soup of public agencies stewarding lands in the Watershed (**Figure 2**). Collaboratively, through dedicated staff and volunteer Committees and Working Groups, the Challenge tackles complex issues, including water policy and planning, human-wildlife conflict, recreation management, and more.

BLACKFOOT WATERSHED COMMUNITIES

- **Bonner** sits at the confluence of the Blackfoot and the Clark Fork Rivers in Missoula County, about five miles east of the city of Missoula. With economic roots in forestry, the mill closure in 2008 marked a significant economic transition. Located near the intersection of HWY 200 and Interstate 90, Bonner is a gateway community to outdoor recreation in the Blackfoot Watershed. Bonner-West Riverside (including Bonner, Milltown, West Riverside, and Pine Grove) is a Census-Designated Place home to 1,690 people, according to the 2020 Census.
- **Ovando** in Powell County is a small rural community in the Blackfoot Valley, home to approximately 83 people, according to the 2020 Census. The town's economy runs on ranching, agriculture, and tourism. Located between HWY 200 and the Blackfoot River, Ovando is well-positioned to watch the ebbs and flows of outdoor recreation. Ovando is also home to the Blackfoot Challenge Headquarters.
- **Lincoln**, located near the headwaters of the Blackfoot River in Lewis and Clark County, is home to 998 people. The community's position in the heart of the mountains makes it a gateway to outdoor recreation in the Watershed. HWY 200 follows the Blackfoot River and connects Lincoln to communities downstream. East of Lincoln, the HWY crosses the Continental Divide at Rogers Pass and continues toward Great Falls. Lincoln's Chamber of Commerce recently published a Community Master Plan in 2023 with a stated objective to increase recreation opportunities. Lincoln is also home to Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest's Lincoln Ranger Station.
- **Helmville**, near the confluence of Nevada Creek and the Blackfoot River, Helmville is a small, rural community with about 38 people in town and a total of 481 in the surrounding area of northern Powell County. The community's economy depends on agriculture and a legacy of farming and ranching. Helmville is connected to Drummond to the southeast by HWY 271 and Avon to the southeast by HWY 141.
- **Potomac**, in rural Missoula County, is one of the small communities along the Lower Blackfoot. The broader Potomac-Greenough, or Greenough-Potomac, community (depending on your persuasion) has an economy characterized by tourism, agriculture, and forestry. Potomac is home to the community center and volunteer

fire department. The University of Montana’s Lubrecht Experimental Forest sits between Potomac and Greenough and provides recreation access for local communities and visitors.

- **Seeley Lake**, a community named for the adjoining lake, has a population of 1682 people. Seeley is positioned at the intersection of the Blackfoot and Swan Valleys on Highway 83. The recent closure of the town’s lumber mill in 2024 has deepened community interest in expanding its recreation economy. Currently, Seeley Lake caters to summer and winter recreators, and the community seeks to expand its winter recreation opportunities. The community is also home to Lolo National Forest’s Seeley Lake Ranger Station.

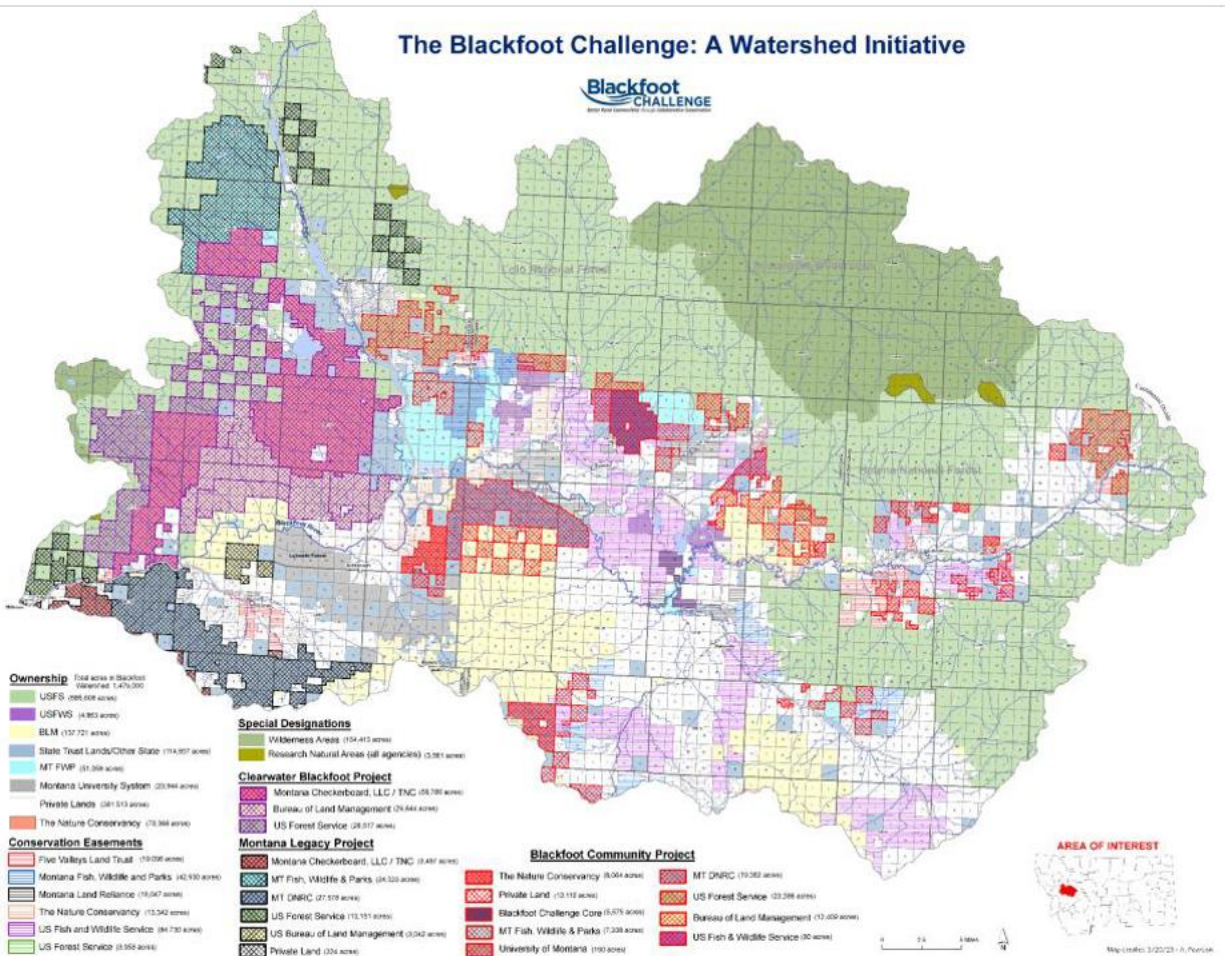


Figure 2. Map of Diverse Ownership and Management in the Blackfoot Watershed

PHASE 1: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MEETINGS

SECTION SUMMARY

Phase 1 included meetings in six communities in the Blackfoot Watershed: Potomac/Greenough, Seeley Lake, Lincoln, Ovando, Bonner, and Helmville. Community engagement meetings took place in a public setting, like a school or library, and were 1.5 hours in duration. The Blackfoot Challenge advertised community meetings through the Blackfoot Challenge Board, Staff, and Interested Parties lists, the Water Committee, the Seeley Swan Pathfinder newspaper and community calendar, the Potomac School newsletter, flyers printed and posted in Ovando, Blackfoot Angler community email list, Blackfoot Challenge newsletter, and social media.

The goals of the community engagement meetings were to (1) initiate the community engagement process between Blackfoot Challenge and communities in the watershed on recreation; (2) understand the key aspects of the watershed that communities find important; (3) understand the opportunities and strengths for recreation in the watershed; (4) understand the challenges of recreation in the watershed. Based on the sign-in sheets, there were 10 participants in Bonner, 17 participants in Ovando, 22 participants in Greenough/Potomac, 13 participants in Helmville, 16 participants in Seeley Lake, and 15 participants in Lincoln.

Each meeting opened with a welcome from the Blackfoot Challenge staff and board, an overview of the project and goals, and an opportunity for everyone to introduce themselves. Then, participants split into small groups and rotated between three stations. At each station, facilitators ask participants one of the following questions:

- Why is outdoor recreation in the Blackfoot Watershed important to you and your community?

- What do you think are the primary issues and concerns related to recreation and tourism in your community? In the Blackfoot Watershed?
- Where can outdoor recreation be expanded / where do opportunities exist in your community? In the Blackfoot Watershed?
- Where should recreation be limited in your community? In the Blackfoot Watershed?
- How do you think aspects outside the Blackfoot Watershed are impacting outdoor recreation and your community?

Facilitators captured participants' comments in notes, and participants had the opportunity to share additional comments directly in writing. Notes from each of the community meetings are in the Appendix. The facilitation team developed an online survey with the same question prompts, which was posted and distributed by the Blackfoot Challenge for those individuals who could not attend the meetings. Communities shared similar key issues across the Watershed; however, some communities emphasized different points more than others. Facilitators synthesized the key themes from each of the Community Engagement Meetings and the online survey. There were 37 participants in the online survey. These community responses directly shaped the subsequent community workshops in Phases 2 and 3.



QUESTION 1: WHY IS OUTDOOR RECREATION IN THE BLACKFOOT WATERSHED IMPORTANT TO YOU AND YOUR COMMUNITY?

Experience

Community members from across the Blackfoot Watershed shared how outdoor recreation contributes to their way of life through their physical, mental, and spiritual health and well-being. Community members engage in outdoor recreation to experience beauty, solitude, connection with nature, and a sense of community. Some examples include:

- “outdoor recreation is part of our culture, [it] goes back generations” [Bonner]
- “being on a first-name-basis with many trees” [Seeley Lake]
- “Recreation bonds people together” [Potomac]
- “[outdoor recreation] is part of who we are as a community” [Ovando]
- “Recreation is just living” [Ovando]

Community members from across the watershed valued the proximity of diverse outdoor recreation opportunities. While there were many similarities in meeting participants' responses between communities, the specific outdoor recreation activities varied. For example, river recreation was more often referenced by communities on the Lower Blackfoot, lake recreation was more often referenced by communities around Seeley Lake, hunting on private lands was more often referenced in Helmville, etc.

Stewardship

Community members across the Blackfoot Watershed shared the importance of outdoor recreation to an ongoing legacy of environmental stewardship. Meeting

participants emphasized their gratitude to those who have stewarded the watershed in the past and their sense of responsibility to pass healthy lands and waters to future generations. A meeting participant in Ovando shared, “We love the land and want to take care of it”. Similarly, a participant in Lincoln highlighted that recreation sustains the environment and, “keeps lands protected”. One Missoula resident stated, “There is nowhere else that is more precious to me than the Blackfoot River. I grew up on the river, and I want it to be available to future generations to enjoy as I have.”

Communities in the Blackfoot Watershed emphasized the importance of protecting lands and waters for recreation and wildlife, including clean, connected habitat corridors. Landowners in the Blackfoot take pride in their role protecting and providing recreation access for the public, whether through Block Management for hunting, the Blackfoot River Corridor Agreement, or unofficial river access sites on private lands. Conservation easements further protect the ecological value of private lands. Communities recognized the challenge of balancing outdoor recreation with environmental impact as a “double-edged sword”. In some communities, outdoor recreation was valued as a tool to preserve open space without subdividing. For example, one landowner spoke to the importance of public hunting as a management tool to keep elk moving on private lands.

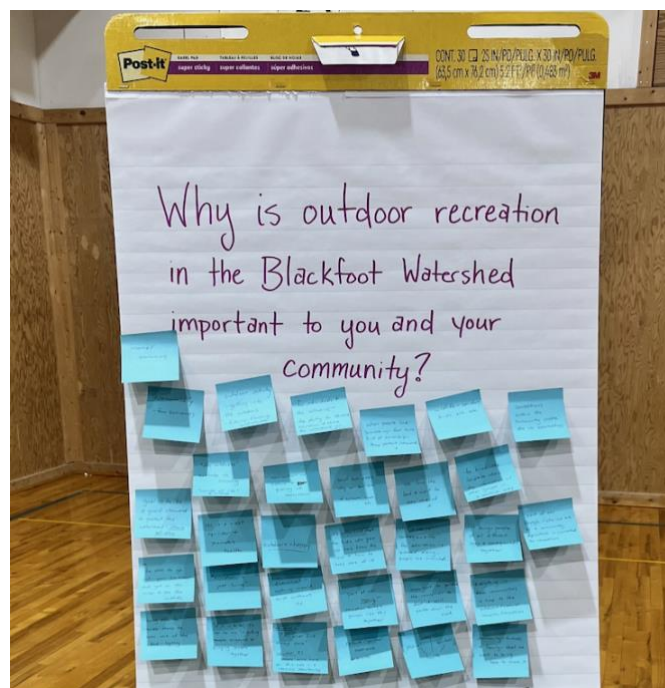
Economy

Across community meetings in the watershed, meeting participants voiced the importance of outdoor recreation to local economies. Many individuals shared how local businesses depend on tourism dollars. “Recreation is critical to supporting local businesses”, as one Lincoln meeting participant shared. Those businesses include lodging, transportation, food and beverage, fly shops and gear rentals, guides and outfitters, artists, and more. Importantly, meeting participants emphasized that not only businesses benefit from the outdoor recreation economy. Community members noted that schools, roads, and other public

services rely on tourism revenue. One Bonner participant summarized it this way: “What’s important for individuals is important for communities”.

While respondents across the watershed shared that tourism drives an outdoor recreation economy, the economic weight of outdoor recreation varied across the watershed and between communities. For some communities in the watershed, outdoor recreation was understood to be the primary economic driver. For example, a meeting participant in Potomac shared, “Recreation keeps Seeley and Ovando alive”. In Seeley, following the recent Pyramid Mountain Lumber Mill Closure in August 2024, outdoor recreation was viewed as a potential year-round economic opportunity.

For other communities in the watershed where outdoor recreation tourism was not the primary source of livelihood, respondents shared differing perspectives. For example, one participant in Helmville shared, “Recreation is necessary, but can feel extractive”. Importantly, there was no one-size-fits-all view of the importance of outdoor recreation to the economy of the Blackfoot Watershed.



QUESTION 2: WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE PRIMARY ISSUES AND CONCERNS RELATED TO RECREATION AND TOURISM IN YOUR COMMUNITY? IN THE BLACKFOOT WATERSHED?

Community members expressed concern about the impacts of recreation and tourism in various ways including (1) impacts to fisheries/resources/wildlife; (2) impacts to recreational experience; (3) behavior/etiquette of recreationists; (4) infrastructure/enforcement; (5) impacts to community/local culture; (6) traffic/safety issues; (7) tension between recreation types and with communities; (8) policies/permits; and (9) issues with outfitters. Examples of each of these categories of concerns/issues and the communities that identified these challenges are provided below.

Impacts to Fisheries/Resource/Wildlife

Discussed in Bonner, Ovando, Helmville, Potomac, Seeley Lake, Lincoln

- “Making sure recreation use and tourism is sustainable ecologically” [Bonner]
- “Amount of fishing is too much. Bad for fish health” [Ovando]
- “Invasive weeds from OHV’s and side by sides” [Helmville]
- “Impacting wildlife movement because of illegal trespassing” [Potomac]
- “Human waste contaminating lakes and fish” [Seeley Lake]
- “Displacement of wildlife from side-by-sides” [Lincoln]

Impacts to Recreational Experience

Discussed in Bonner, Ovando, Potomac, Seeley Lake, survey respondents from Missoula

- “Lack of spontaneous recreation opportunities” [Bonner]

- “Increased fishing pressure statewide. Makes me not want to fish” [Ovando]
- “No areas to horseback ride that don't involve ATVs or mountain bikes” [Potomac]
- “Not enough reservable campsites in summer” [Potomac]
- “Human waste contaminating lakes and fish” [Seeley Lake]
- “No spontaneous camping because of reservations” [Seeley Lake]
- “It's concerning when locals can't get float-in camping regulations, yet those who do end up being no-shows. Montana loves and needs a thriving tourism economy, but not at the expense of access for those who love and work in Montana” [Missoula]

Behavior/Etiquette of Recreationists

Discussed in Bonner, Ovando, Lincoln, survey respondents from Missoula

- “Dumping, trespassing, and recreational shooting on private land” [Bonner]
- “Lack of respect when people catch fish. Handling them. Need education.” [Ovando]
- “Visitors don't understand vulnerability of fish - equipment and behavior” [Lincoln]
- “Trash and debris in the river from careless floaters. Overfishing when the water temperature is up in summer.” [Missoula]

Infrastructure/Enforcement

Discussed in Ovando, Helmville, Potomac, Seeley Lake, Lincoln, survey respondents from Missoula

- “FAS sites overused - Lack of enforcement presence” [Ovando]
- “Limited law enforcement in area” [Helmville]
- “Aging infrastructure - capacity issue” [Potomac]
- “Need for more infrastructure and staff capacity” [Seeley Lake]

- “Policing needed for OHV use” [Lincoln]
- “Need for better boat ramps/ easier ramps” [Missoula]

Impacts to Community/Culture

Discussed in Ovando, Seeley Lake, Lincoln

- “How to sustain cultural values’ [Ovando]
- Losing small town feel and values [Seeley Lake]
- “Locals stop going to local places” [Lincoln]

Increased Traffic/Safety Issues

Discussed in Helmville, Potomac, Seeley Lake, Lincoln

- “Increased traffic impacting roads and resources” [Helmville]
- “Traffic and HWY 2 speed- Highway of Death” [Potomac]
- “Vehicle traffic and fragmented lands cause safety issues” [Seeley Lake]
- “Safety issues with motorized recreation and regular traffic” [Lincoln]

Tension between Recreation Types and with Communities

Discussed in Helmville, Potomac, Lincoln, and survey respondents from Missoula

- “Increased conflict between landowners and recreationists (trespass camping)” [Helmville]
- “Recreationalists assume their right to use areas next to my private property is more important than my family and our home.” [Potomac]
- “No one understand private lands - need to have shared values with communities” [Lincoln]
- “When there are conflicts between wade anglers and floaters, float bans have been proposed (twice now) as a solution, which privileges one group over

another. Conflicts rarely result between wade anglers and non-fishing floaters like kayakers, rafters, and tubers” [Missoula]

Policies/Permits

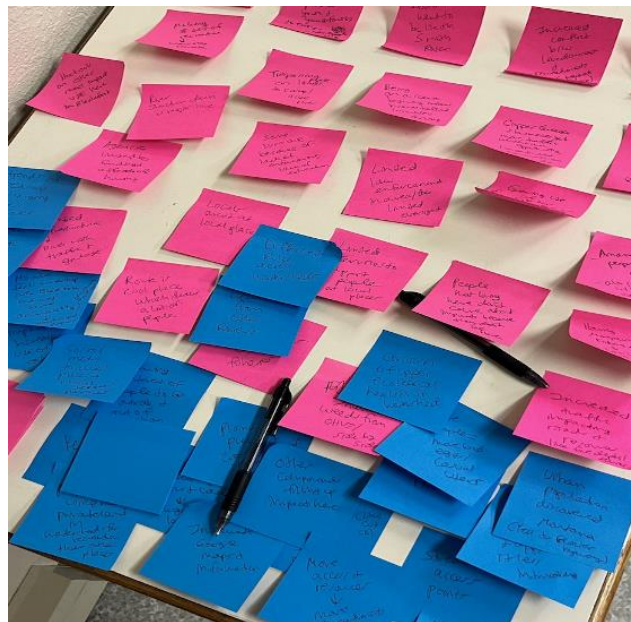
Discussed in Helmville

- “Concerned with limiting use/permits” [Helmville]
- “Regulation and use of water - prioritizing fish over ranches” [Helmville]

Issues with Outfitters

Discussed by survey respondents from Missoula

- “Commercial fishing has over crowded both access sites and rafts "parking" on holes on the river” [Missoula]
- “Overuse and over allocation of fishing outfitting on Blackfoot, Overuse by Paws Up in numerous areas, illegal targeting of bull trout at stream mouths and in N Fork” [Missoula]



QUESTION 3: WHERE CAN OUTDOOR RECREATION BE EXPANDED / WHERE DO OPPORTUNITIES EXIST IN YOUR COMMUNITY? IN THE BLACKFOOT WATERSHED?

When discussing outdoor recreation in the Blackfoot Watershed, “expansion” was a controversial word. When prompted, meeting participants were quick to assert that outdoor recreation should only be expanded somewhere else, outside of the Watershed or outside of Montana. In an online response from Missoula, one participant asserted that “outdoor recreation doesn’t need to be expanded: opportunities are abundant”. While many communities expressed the sentiment of “expand anywhere but here”, there were opportunities discussed for outdoor recreation to be expanded through enforcement, education, and infrastructure. Meeting participants also shared opportunities to expand specific activities in their communities and elsewhere in the watershed.

Enforcement

Across the Blackfoot Watershed, meeting participants desired an expansion in the enforcement of parking, fishing licenses, and private property rights. One participant in the Bonner meeting stated, “Absolutely no expansion without more enforcement”. There was a widespread recognition that increased enforcement requires increased staffing of law enforcement officials with the state and county. The specifics of enforcement varied across the watershed. In Lincoln, for example, meeting participants recommended expanding enforcement of OHVs on county roads, sharing, “kids don't have helmets, they’re driving too fast and drinking”. There was also interest from communities in the lower Blackfoot to enforce camping in undesignated areas. In Lincoln and Helmville, meeting participants shared a need for greater enforcement of trespassing.

Education

In community meetings across the Blackfoot Watershed, meeting participants advocated for expanding educational opportunities for outdoor recreationists through educational programs and interpretive signs. Meeting participants in each community felt that visitors in particular needed additional education to communicate local rules, norms, how to “recreate responsibly” and “pass on the legacy” of environmental stewardship, and “respect for the land”.

In community meetings across the watershed, participants expressed their desire to expand educational and interpretive program focused on river health, fishing, birdlife, human-bear safety, and proper use of fishing with barbless hooks. Participants discussed the expansion of outdoor recreation education to create programs for youth, veterans, and people with disabilities. There was further interest in adapting the Clark Fork Coalition’s River Ambassadors program for the Blackfoot Watershed.

Meeting participants also advocated for the expansion of maps and interpretive signage to communicate responsible river use at all river access sites, a need for maps to educate where there is e-bike access, information on winter recreation activities, and private property.

Infrastructure

In community meetings across the Watershed, participants shared opportunities to expand and improve infrastructure and facilities. Many of these improvements were interconnected, e.g., roads, parking, restrooms, and ADA accessibility. Participants shared that many roads are in poor condition from increased recreation pressure, and their improvement requires action from county and state agencies. In Potomac and Helmville, meeting participants suggested expanding ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) accessible infrastructure, including wheelchair-accessible trails, boat launches, etc.

When expanding parking was discussed, it was hand-in-hand with increased enforcement. However, community members across the watershed recognized that attempting to limit users by limiting parking often leads to undesired overflow, blocking public and private roadways. In Seeley, meeting participants recommended introducing a shuttle or other transit infrastructure for recreators in the lower corridor to assist with parking congestion.

Meeting participants rarely recommended expanding river use, but participants did suggest ideas to spread out congestion. For example, in Seeley, meeting participants recommended expanding foot-only access. In Helmville and Lincoln, participants discussed increasing public access opportunities (e.g., through the use of walkover ladders to keep gates closed) without trespassing. Respondents also suggested expanding facilities for waste removal and bear safety. Similarly, there was an interest in increasing access to bear-resistant trash cans and bear-proof containers in campgrounds.



Recreation Activities

Across the Watershed, meeting participants shared that the volume of summer river recreation required limitations. However, communities identified other recreation activities as opportunities for expansion. Across the watershed, community members voiced interest in expanding winter recreation. In Ovando, meeting participants shared that despite feeling overrun during the summer, there is an opportunity to expand winter recreation at the watershed level. However, diminishing snowpack was a concern. For example, a respondent shared, “Maybe snowmobiling could be expanded but we don’t get snow anymore.” The potential conflict between skiers and snowmobilers was noted with suggestions of a potential system for skiers and snowmobilers to share trails asynchronously on alternating days and/or to designate separate parking for each group.

Meeting participants also discussed expanding and connecting forest roads and trail systems for hikers, bikers, OHVs, and horses, noting an opportunity to connect existing opportunities across the Watershed. Meeting participants also discussed expanding recreation opportunities for birdwatching and wildlife viewing. Meeting participants in Ovando recommended expanding cycling opportunities in the lower Blackfoot, sharing that the cycling community is growing and in need of safer routes than HWY 200. Similarly in Seeley, meeting participants identified an opportunity to connect cycling opportunities up to Condon and down to Clearwater Junction.



QUESTION 4: WHERE SHOULD RECREATION BE LIMITED IN YOUR COMMUNITY? IN THE BLACKFOOT WATERSHED?

Across the Blackfoot Watershed, community meeting participants felt that recreation should be limited to protect the environment and to alleviate high-congestion areas of the river. Away from the river, meeting participants felt recreation for hikers, bikers, horses, and OHVs should be limited to use-specific trails.

Environmental Impacts

Community members across the Watershed shared the negative environmental impacts of recreation as their primary reason for limiting recreation to protect habitat for fish and wildlife, reduce bank erosion, and slow the spread of invasive species. One meeting participant in Potomac laid out the relationship between recreation and wildlife, saying, “No expansion - wildlife has nowhere to go”. Protecting habitat for threatened and endangered species including wolverine, lynx, grizzly, westslope cutthroat, and bull trout were of particular concern. An Ovando participant noted that “the river and lakes are getting pounded”. Participants in Seeley felt that recreation should be limited to protect sensitive species like eagles and loons. Participants across the Watershed spoke about limiting recreation in grizzly bear habitat and travel corridors. For example, one respondent shared, “Mountain bikes should be limited to front country out of grizzly bear territory.” Importantly, community members have diverse perspectives on what is and isn’t “grizzly bear territory” in the Blackfoot Watershed.

River Regulation

Across the watershed, community members voiced a collective desire to reduce the number of boats and the impact of fishing on the Blackfoot River. River use is

seasonal, and as one Ovando participant explained, “July equals bumper boats”. A meeting participant in Lincoln summarized the need for limiting river recreation, “we are loving it to death”.

While communities across the watershed agreed that boats should be limited, the solutions varied within and between communities. Communities discussed limiting numbers by changing the permitting system. Depending on the individual community member, the Smith River’s reservation system was referenced as an example of both success and failure. Some community members recommended employing an alternating license plate system to reduce daily river use. Regardless of the system, communities shared a collective concern that further permitting could limit local communities’ access to and relationship with the river.

Community members shared that any steps to limit recreation on the river should differentiate between personal and commercial users. Meeting participants expressed concerns about both the number of commercial outfitters and their etiquette. In Ovando, for example, meeting participants shared that the number of boats should be limited per outfitter per stretch. One online respondent shared, “I would like to think it [recreation] is self-limiting, but some of the access sites are overrun with commercial outfitters”.

When water temperatures are particularly stressful for fish, FWP implements “hoot owl” fishing restrictions which prohibit fishing between 2 p.m. and midnight. Across the watershed, hoot owl compliance was a concern. Meeting participants also recommended updating the hoot owl trigger on the Blackfoot to reflect changing river conditions. Beyond the mainstem Blackfoot, meeting participants in Potomac shared that lower-use areas need proactive limitations (e.g., Bull trout spawning areas on the North Fork). Participants also recommended limiting the use of treble hooks on the river.

QUESTION 5: HOW DO YOU THINK ASPECTS OUTSIDE THE BLACKFOOT WATERSHED ARE IMPACTING OUTDOOR RECREATION AND YOUR COMMUNITY?

Across the Watershed, meeting participants attributed the dramatic increase in tourism and new residents to the combined impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the media, especially the “Yellowstone effect”. In Bonner, Ovando, Helmville, Seeley Lake, Lincoln, and Missoula, participants also shared the Climate Change impacts of reducing snowpack and water levels and increasing wildfire risk and wildfire smoke. Meeting participants in Bonner, Helmville, Potomac, and Seeley also explained how restrictions and closures on other rivers (e.g., the Bitterroot and Clark Fork) concentrate angling pressure on the Blackfoot.

Additionally, meeting participants shared the following aspects: Need for watershed/system planning, need for infrastructure improvements and increased capacity, challenges of increased cost of living, inconsistent policies and need for more enforcement, concerns of changing local culture, new recreation users and their behaviors, and expansion of technology and media that increase access to sites.



PHASE 2: VISIONING WORKSHOP



SECTION SUMMARY

In Phase 2, our shared process brought together participants from Bonner, Ovando, Helmville, Greenough/Potomac, Seeley, and Lincoln to conduct a Watershed-wide Visioning Workshop on November 7, 2024, at Lubrecht Experimental Forest. This 1.5-hour Visioning Workshop was the first of two community workshops, and the second workshop is expanded upon in Phase 3. In this Visioning Workshop, community members worked together with facilitators to achieve the group's meeting objectives:

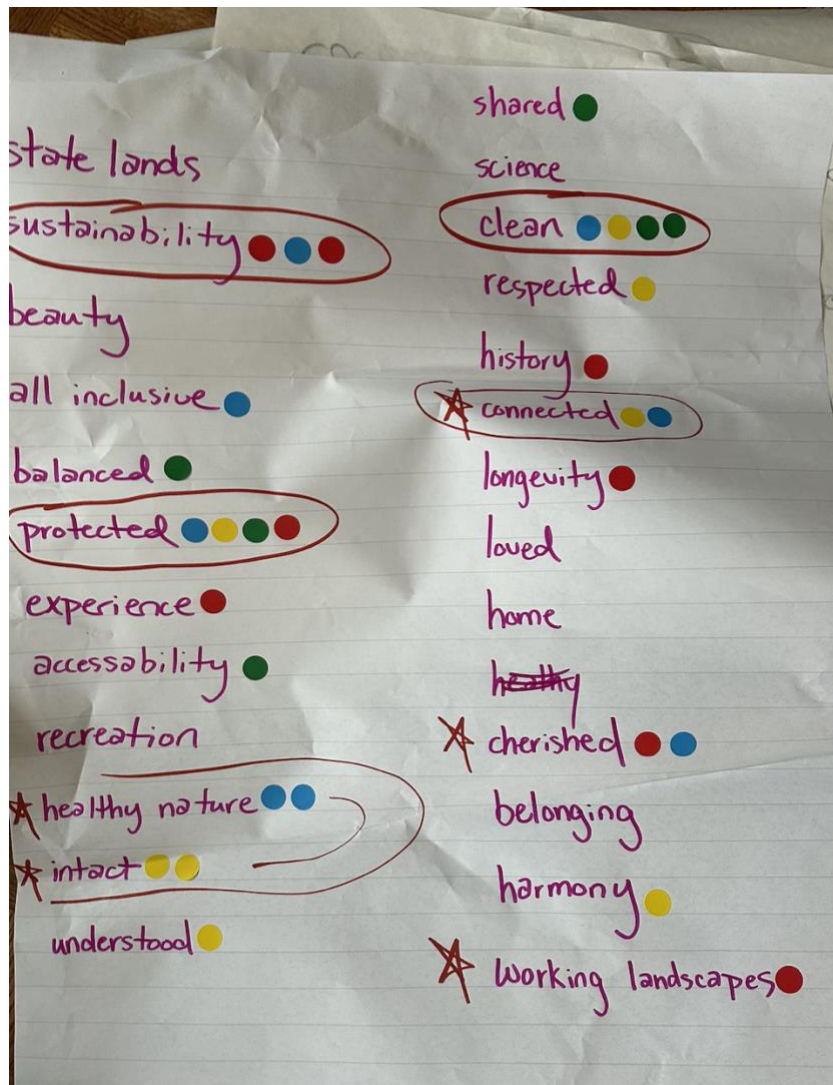
- Build a community of practice for recreation decision-making across different communities in the watershed
- Lay a foundation for a co-created vision statement for ridgetop-to-ridgetop recreation
- Map recreation opportunities and assets across the watershed

Approximately thirty people participated in the workshop. Blackfoot Challenge staff welcomed community members to the Workshop, opened the meeting with an overview of the project's goals, and summarized what had been accomplished through the community meetings in Phase 1. To build shared knowledge about the purpose and usefulness of vision statements, facilitators from the University of Montana guided Workshop participants through outdoor recreation vision statements adopted by other Montana communities. After refreshing participants' familiarity with vision statements, facilitators synthesized the main ideas or *key themes* relating to outdoor recreation in the Watershed that were shared across community meetings (see Phase 1, Question 1). After laying a foundation for vision statements, we divided into small groups to workshop a vision statement for outdoor recreation in the Blackfoot Watershed.

In the first small group activity, community participants shared keywords and phrases they wanted to see included in an outdoor recreation vision statement. Facilitators compiled these initial words and phrases into a list, and each small group participant used color-coded stickers to vote for their Top Five words and phrases. While brainstorming the initial list, facilitators and participants discussed the deeper meaning of each word or phrase. For example, one small group discussed the complexity behind "sustainability". Some in that group valued the word "sustainability" and understood it to contain both the needs of present and future generations. Others shared concerns that "sustainability" was becoming a buzzword, that had lost its original meaning.

In the second activity, facilitators tallied the Top Five words and phrases from the previous exercise. For each word or phrase, facilitators asked participants to share examples of places in the Watershed that embodied that vision element and places in the watershed where that vision element needs improvement. Here, small group participants further elaborated on the meaning behind their selected Top Five, and facilitators captured these comments.

The Visioning Workshop concluded with each small group sharing the highlights of their respective discussions with the other groups. The facilitation team synthesized the key themes from the workshop to develop draft vision statements and examples that would inform the activities for the next workshop in Phase 3.



TOP FIVE WORDS/PHRASES SYNTHESIS

The facilitation team synthesized Visioning Workshop participants' top words and phrases to be included in a future vision statement for outdoor recreation in the Watershed. Importantly, no single word or phrase was selected in common by every Workshop participant, so synonyms and similar concepts were lumped together into the following "buckets" or themes (see Appendix for a complete list of words/phrases):

- Sustainability, Balance
- Resource Protection, Stewardship
- Clean, Healthy, Connected, Watershed
- Adaptive and Dynamic Management, Strategic Planning
- Way of Life, Community Vitality, Supporting Livelihoods

Sustainability, Balance

Each small group discussed sustainability differently and emphasized unique aspects of their collective vision for recreation in the Watershed. Some related sustainability to the management practices on public and private land, while others related sustainability to balancing the needs of wildlife with increasing outdoor recreation. Importantly, some groups highlighted the strengths of an engaged, collaborative community of practice and the relative health of the watershed.

Workshop participants also identified several challenges to achieving sustainability and balance in outdoor recreation in the watershed, such as the negative impact of recreation on the health of the fish and wildlife, unregulated development, limited capacity of communities and managers, and the pressures on communities from outside the Watershed to increase tourism.



Resource Protection, Stewardship

While the language used varied between groups, Workshop participants emphasized the protection and/or stewardship of resources in the Watershed. Small groups discussed the commitment of private landowners and the practice of easements as some of the Watershed's strengths for achieving long-term resource protection/stewardship. One group shared that the Blackfoot Challenge's Stewardship Guide helps visitors and communities enact sound wildlife, forestry, and agricultural practices. Participants referenced the North Fork of the Blackfoot and the Scapegoat Wilderness as examples of places that embodied resource protection and stewardship.

Despite these strengths, Workshop participants saw many challenges to enacting resource protection/stewardship in the Watershed. Participants shared that

recreation pressure from overcrowding and the behavior or lack of education of recreationists can cause safety concerns and concerns for the resources. Small groups also shared how the closure of mills has impacted fire and forestry management in the watershed despite coordinated efforts. Additionally, participants felt that terms like “stewardship” can encompass many different meanings and interpretations which may result in inconsistent actions and efforts across jurisdictions and communities.

Clean, Healthy, Connected Watershed

Workshop participants valued the character of the Watershed, variously referencing its clean, healthy, and connected qualities. Participants spoke to the strengths of the Watershed including clean water and healthy, intact nature - especially in Wilderness areas. Small groups also shared that the Blackfoot River Corridor enables unique and connected public access.

Workshop participants shared that fragmentation across the watershed from roads, subdivisions, development, and private lands may cause challenges to connectivity for wildlife and recreation. Some participants shared concerns about water quality in select parts of the river corridor.

Adaptive and Dynamic Management, Strategic Planning

Small groups discussed the changing social and ecological landscape and the need for thoughtful, long-term, Watershed-wide planning. There was no consensus around the word or phrase to encapsulate this element of a vision statement, so the “bucket” holds adaptive management, dynamic management, and strategic planning. Wordsmithing aside, participants shared the collaborative spirit and existing plans for drought response and block management as strengths of the Watershed.

Workshop participants felt emerging issues like snowmobile management (e.g., around Lincoln) or managing relatively new types of recreation (e.g., e-bikes) present challenges for planning. Additionally, the limited capacity for agencies and communities to respond to issues or overuse in a timely and coordinated approach can enhance conflicts among recreationists and between recreationists and landowners, further burdening agencies and communities.

Way of Life, Community Vitality, and Supporting Livelihoods

Workshop participants variously voiced the importance of preserving the unique cultural heritage of communities in the Watershed, described by different small groups as a “way of life”, “community vitality”, or “livelihood”. Small groups felt that continuing this way of life was critical for any vision statement about outdoor recreation. Residents shared that outdoor recreation strengthens community vitality and supports livelihoods through tourism dollars for current residents and future generations. The unique way of life in the small, rural communities of the Watershed was highlighted as a strength important to maintain into the future.

Participants also shared challenges relating to the housing shortage for seasonal recreation staff and visitors, outfitters traveling from outside the area to utilize the watershed, and tourism dollars flowing outside the communities. Participants further shared their fear that as more people move to the area from out-of-state, the identities of the communities are changing as houses turn to rental properties instead of permanent residents. Lastly, as congestion grows in the area, participants voiced concerns for safety on the roadways and the overall behavior of visitors.

PHASE 3: PRIORITIES FOR ACTION WORKSHOP

SECTION SUMMARY

Building from our Visioning Workshop, the next step of our collaborative process was to convene a Priorities for Action Workshop with community members from across the Blackfoot Watershed. Workshop participants gathered for 1.5 hours in the Ovando Elementary School Gym on December 4, 2024. Recognizing that many in our Priorities for Action Workshop may not have attended our Visioning Workshop, facilitators echoed meeting objectives from the previous workshop and added a new direction:

- Build a community of practice for recreation decision-making across different communities in the watershed
- Co-create a vision statement for ridgetop-to-ridgetop recreation
- Identify and prioritize key priority actions

Approximately twenty people participated in the workshop. Blackfoot Challenge staff welcomed Workshop participants with an overview of the project's goals and accomplishments from the Phase 1: Community Engagement Meetings and Phase 2: Visioning Workshop. The facilitation team then presented four draft vision statements with keywords and phrases that were identified in the Visioning Workshop. Participants used different stickers to indicate their ranking of the vision statements followed by a discussion on what elements could be added or refined.

Participants then split into small groups. Facilitators presented these groups with a list of key issues or challenges that emerged from the Community Engagement

Meetings and Visioning Workshop. Workshop participants discussed potential solutions to address these challenges. Facilitators worked with participants to sort their proposed actions by expected level of effort and expected level of impact.

Facilitators also developed an online questionnaire to share with participants who listed their email in the previous Community Engagement Meetings to gain additional community feedback and better represent the entire Watershed in the draft vision statement and the priorities for action. A total of 19 participated in the online survey. The following section synthesizes comments from the in-person workshop and the online questionnaire.



VISION STATEMENT PREFERENCES

Facilitators shared examples of draft vision statements with participants. These draft vision statements include the keywords and phrases identified in the earlier Visioning Workshop in different combinations to reflect the diversity of perspectives shared by communities across the watershed. Priorities for Action Workshop participants then ranked these draft statements using color-coded stickers. Community members also voted for their top draft statement in an online survey. The draft vision statements and ranked-choice results from the workshop and the survey are listed below. The draft vision statement highlighted in bold was the clear preference among workshop participants and online responses.

To balance our rural way of life, natural resource stewardship, and recreation livelihoods in the Blackfoot Watershed for community members, visitors, and future generations.

- Workshop
 - 1st Choice = 1 vote; 2nd Choice = 2 votes; 3rd Choice = 1 vote; 4th Choice = 8 votes
- Survey
 - 1st Choice = 5 votes

To sustain our rural way of life, enhance natural resource protection, and adapt to increasing recreation opportunities.

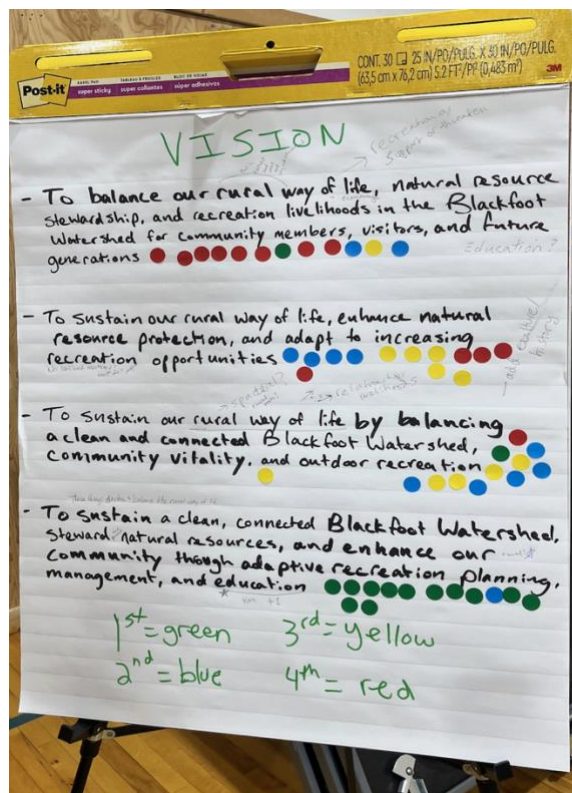
- Workshop
 - 1st Choice = 0 votes; 2nd Choice = 4 votes; 3rd Choice = 5 votes; 4th Choice = 4 votes
- Survey
 - 1st Choice = 4 votes

To sustain our rural way of life by balancing a clean and connected Blackfoot Watershed, community vitality, and outdoor recreation.

- Workshop
 - 1st Choice = 1 vote; 2nd Choice = 5 votes; 3rd Choice = 5 votes; 4th Choice = 1 vote
- Survey
 - 1st Choice = 2 votes

To sustain a clean, connected Blackfoot Watershed, steward natural resources, and enhance our community through adaptive recreation planning, management, and education.

- Workshop
 - 1st Choice = 12 votes; 2nd Choice = 1 vote; 3rd Choice = 0 votes; 4th Choice = 0 votes
- Survey
 - 1st Choice = 8 votes



VISION STATEMENT REVISIONS

Workshop participants and online respondents shared potential changes or revisions to draft vision statements in writing and through facilitated discussion. Participants shared that the meaning of some words or phrases was deeply personal and observed that the presence or absence of certain keywords could create points of contention. Learning from these comments will help to refine future iterations of vision statements.

For some participants, the “rural way of life” was too vague or abstract. One comment rephrased “rural way of life” as “rural roots” and connected this to “relationships” and “livelihoods”. Another comment noted that rural could be added to “community”. Similarly, additional comments pointed to the importance of further emphasizing history and culture. One workshop participant recommended the phrase, “holding current, historic, and ancient cultures in common reverence.”

The word “livelihoods” was another discussion point. Some preferred the term “economy” to describe outdoor recreation revenue, while others preferred “jobs”. Others noted the absence of “livelihoods” in some draft vision statements and penciled it in. Workshop participants also emphasized the importance of “education” in the draft vision statement that received the most votes and noted its absence in other statements. One participant felt that “steward” should be amended with “and protect” to deepen its meaning. An online respondent recommended adding “biodiverse” to “clean, connected”. Another online participant noted that “enhance” raised concerns about the power of outside money shaping the future of the Watershed.



Workshop participants in Phases 2 and 3 engaged in a visioning process about outdoor recreation in the Blackfoot Watershed. Further collaborative leadership will be necessary to build consensus around a shared vision for the future. Consider this revised draft vision statement as the common ground for further community discussion and wordsmithing:

To sustain a clean, connected, and biodiverse Blackfoot Watershed, protect and steward natural resources, and strengthen our rural community through adaptive recreation planning, management, and education.

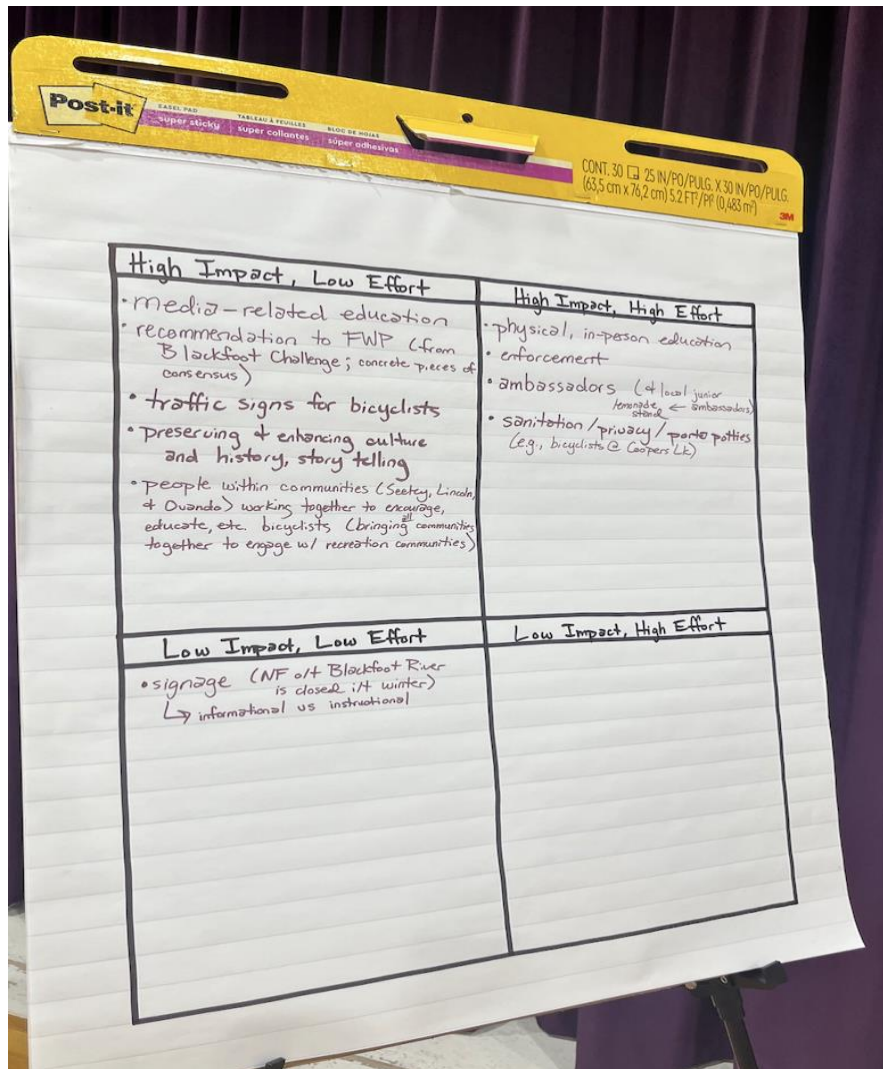
POTENTIAL ACTIONS TO ADDRESS RECREATION CHALLENGES

Workshop and survey participants identified potential actions to address pressing outdoor recreation challenges. Emerging from the earlier Community Engagement Meetings, these challenges can be categorized into the following themes:

- Impacts to Fisheries, Wildlife, and Natural Resources
- Infrastructure, Enforcement, and Capacity
- Behavior and Etiquette of Recreationists
- Impacts on Recreational Experience
- Impacts to Community and Culture
- Increased Traffic and Safety Concerns

In this Priorities for Action Workshop, workshop and survey participants most emphasized: 1.) Impacts to Fisheries, Wildlife, and Natural Resources; 2.) Infrastructure, Enforcement, and Capacity; and 3.) Behavior and Etiquette of Recreationists.

After recommending potential actions to address recreation challenges, workshop participants categorized these actions based on the expected level of impact (high/low impact) and the expected level of effort (high/low effort). Participants discussed and debated the expected levels of impact and effort with one another, generating new ideas and considering the feasibility of implementing these actions in the Watershed. An online survey was distributed to the participants of all community meetings to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the potential actions from those who could not attend the workshop. The following sections summarize the actions recommended by workshop and survey participants to address the most pressing challenges.



Enforcement

Workshop and survey participants' primary recommended actions related to regulation and enforcement. Participants suggested fishing regulations regarding treble hooks, seasonal closures, and stricter rules for triggering hoot owl angling restrictions. Some respondents emphasized requiring permits for rafters and out-of-state visitors. Others expressed the need to more heavily restrict outfitters from out-of-state, limit the overall number of commercial users, and only allow commercial use in certain areas and times. Several participants noted their

interest in establishing a recreational carrying capacity for overall numbers and types of use to improve watershed health and recreational experience.

Workshop and survey participants recognized that rules and regulations mean little without enforcement. Participants shared that enforcement capacity in the Watershed is currently limited. Respondents felt that without increased staff to enforce regulations and write citations, changing regulations alone would not change the recreation behaviors of concern.

Education and Training

Education and training emerged as the second most frequently cited action to address the negative impacts of outdoor recreation. Participants understood visitor and recreationist behaviors to harm resources, wildlife, and communities as well as raise safety concerns. While some emphasized the need for general education, others proposed specific actions, such as training commercial guides and outfitters in stewardship practices to understand the impacts of recreation on fish, wildlife, and other natural resources. Others expressed the need to educate visitors and river users more broadly. Participants suggested strategies for educating outdoor recreators including leveraging media, creating common slogans, offering in-person educational programs, fostering collaboration for unified education and messaging, and providing incentives for responsible stewardship. Education and training were also understood to be an opportunity to highlight unique aspects of local culture and history. Participants identified signage as a low-effort, high-impact action to effectively convey educational information about river regulations and stewardship at river access points and other gathering areas.

Infrastructure

Participants recommended improving facilities and infrastructure to enhance safety in communities and along the river. Workshop and survey participants shared examples including expanding bathroom facilities, enhancing slopes for

boat access, and upgrading campground facilities. Providing bags for human and dog waste disposal was also understood to be a priority. Additionally, several participants recommended installing traffic signs for bicyclists and implementing flashing lights and signage in communities to promote safer driving behaviors.

Hosts/Ambassadors

To address challenges at campgrounds and river access points along the corridor, workshop and survey participants recommended the creation of a river or recreation ambassador program. Participants further suggested introducing campground hosts who could care for high-use areas during peak seasons. Respondents understood that host and ambassador programs may require investment in training and financial resources and suggested that they could also function on a volunteer basis. Participants pointed to existing ambassador programs that could serve as models for the Blackfoot Watershed, particularly in partnership with non-profit organizations and government agencies at both the federal and state levels.

Communication between Communities and Agencies

Workshop and survey participants felt enhancing communication between communities and agencies was crucial to identify high-impact, low-effort actions. For example, streamlining the process for landowners and recreationists to report and document issues to agencies could enhance conservation outcomes and expand agency capacity. Participants felt that actively involving communities in decision-making processes and gathering their collective recommendations could provide valuable insights for Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Workshop participants further requested de-escalation training for communities and agencies to ensure safety and support in resolving conflicts at recreation sites or between landowners and recreationists.

Funding Capacity

To implement many of the actions identified above, workshop and survey respondents emphasized the necessity for increased funding. Several strategies were proposed to achieve this, including implementing a tourism tax in areas where recreational activities take place and reallocating funds from the Montana bed tax to benefit communities and conservation in the Watershed. This funding could support enhanced enforcement, education, infrastructure, and other proposed actions mentioned in previous sections. While this increased economic support could have a high impact, respondents also acknowledged the high effort required to realize this goal.



REFLECTIONS

Overall, the process of engagement with the communities of the Blackfoot Watershed through the six meetings, two workshops, and online forum provided an opportunity to better understand the recreation opportunities and challenges within the Watershed. The following conclusions and reflections can help inform the Blackfoot Challenge on how to utilize the synthesis of findings from this process and some considerations for continuing to strengthen relationships with communities and stakeholders and develop a strategic plan for recreation for the Watershed.

ESTABLISHING A COLLECTIVE VISION

Communities identified the key aspects they found important to include in a vision statement for recreation in the Watershed. This draft vision statement can be considered a subset of the overarching vision for the Blackfoot Challenge. The staff and working groups can review previous versions of vision statements for the river and watershed to further refine the wording and align with the key values of the Blackfoot Challenge as well as the communities and stakeholders. The vision statement can also serve as the foundation for a strategic plan or work plan for recreation to ensure the actions always relate back to fulfilling the overarching vision.

MAPPING OUT PRIORITIES

During various phases of the process, participants identified numerous challenges and concerns to be addressed. In the synthesis of the input from the meetings, workshop, and online forum, several key categories of challenges emerged. However, there was not an opportunity to prioritize these issues to help inform a

more specific work plan. As a next step, Blackfoot Challenge staff and working groups can map out the potential actions spatially and temporally based on short- and long-term planning, high and low effort, and high and low impact in addressing the issue.

TARGETED ENGAGEMENT WITH UNDERREPRESENTED AND SPECIALTY GROUPS

The series of community meetings and workshops had participation of residents, businesses, public land agencies and many other stakeholder groups. The online forum also provided an opportunity for those who could not attend the meetings to provide valuable input. While the process aimed to be as inclusive as possible, there are additional opportunities for targeted engagement with underrepresented and specialty groups. For examples, some meetings and workshops had higher attendance and representation of groups than others. More targeted outreach in Helmville and Lincoln can ensure a more comprehensive perspective from those communities. Additionally, targeted outreach with Tribal communities and specific types of recreation groups such as biking, snowmobiling, and outfitters will be important to addressing opportunities and concerns for recreation in the Watershed.

ASSESSING ACTIONS WITH FEDERAL AND STATE AGENCIES

Large portions of the Blackfoot Watershed encompass public lands and resources that require collaboration with the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks. Representatives from these federal and state agencies participated in the various phases of the project and provided valuable insights to the challenges and the potential actions needed to mitigate these challenges. Phase Three focused on identifying possible actions that the Blackfoot Challenge could include in a work plan; however, there is a need to review these potential actions in more depth with agency partners to

determine the feasibility and the details to carry out these measures as many of the actions would require support and direction from the agencies. Possible next steps could include organizing a workshop with agency representatives to discuss the priorities and actions in more detail to inform a Blackfoot Challenge work plan. Additionally, the identification of two representatives from each agency to be the point contacts with Blackfoot Challenge can foster ongoing engagement with the agencies and account for potential staff turnover.

ADAPT EXISTING STRATEGIES FROM OTHER RIVER AND RECREATION AREAS

Some of the proposed actions, such as the ambassador program, have been adopted by other rivers and recreation areas. Once the Blackfoot Challenge identifies priorities and develops a work plan, next steps could include reaching out to other river/watershed groups to learn how they implemented these programs and the efficacy of these actions.

UTILIZE STEWARDSHIP AND EDUCATION RESOURCES

There are numerous stewardship and education resources that have been established such as the Glacier Country Destination Stewardship Plan to help educate tourists/recreationists and new residents to communities. Depending on the targeted issue, the Blackfoot Challenge can help ensure consistent messaging throughout the Watershed across communities and jurisdictions. There are also opportunities to work with University of Montana to help design interpretive programs and signage.

IDENTIFY REPRESENTATIVES FROM COMMUNITIES TO FACILITATE REGULAR COMMUNICATION

Through this process of meetings and workshops, communities emphasized their enthusiasm to engage with the Blackfoot Challenge and bring the communities together across the Watershed. To further strengthen the regular communication between the Blackfoot Challenge and communities, it is recommended to identify two members from each community to participate in an existing Blackfoot Challenge Working Group or possibly create a standalone group to meet quarterly and have clear channels for the representatives to collect or provide information to their respective communities.

C O N C L U S I O N

Rural communities in the Blackfoot Watershed are navigating outdoor recreation opportunities and challenges. Through this comprehensive community engagement process, community members have shared recreation-related issues and concerns, begun to map key areas of concern, drafted a vision for outdoor recreation, and identified priority actions. Community-identified actions include enhancing enforcement, education, infrastructure, communication, and funding capacity. To enact these actions, Blackfoot Challenge Staff and Working Groups should refine and reach consensus on the drafted vision statement, further map priorities, engage underrepresented stakeholders, deepen collaboration with federal and state agencies during funding uncertainty, adapt successful recreation strategies, leverage educational resources, and facilitate regular communication. Together with agency partners, communities are balancing conservation and recreation in the Blackfoot Watershed.

A P P E N D I X

If you have questions about this report or would like access to the research appendix containing additional community responses, please email Dr. Jennifer Thomsen at jennifer.thomsen@mso.umt.edu