

August 15-16 Visitor Use Management (VUM) Workshop

Background and Context

Visitor use management is a growing priority in the recreation community. In August 2023, the Society of Outdoor Recreation Professionals (SORP) hosted a workshop that aimed to foster connection, learning, networking, and professional development among the outdoor recreation community planning and managing visitor use. The workshop was attended by state, federal, and local land and water managers, university researchers and professors, and VUM consultants.

This document reviews the workshop, which:

- Created a shared understanding of visitor use management
- Discussed implementation challenges and opportunities for federal and non-federal land and water managers
- Identified successes and lessons learned in implementing visitor use management across various jurisdictions
- Identified best practices for visitor use management across multiple jurisdictions
- Identified future directions for visitor use management

Breakout group discussions were captured on a [Google Jamboard](#) (virtual participants) and on [flip charts](#) (in-person participants).

A Shared Understanding of Visitor Use Management

Workshop participants heard an overview of the approach that various jurisdictions apply to visitor use management from Sam Rider (U.S. Forest Service, Interagency Visitor Use Management Council), Keri McMahon (Parks Canada), Rex Turner (Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands), and Pine Roehrs (New York State Department of Environmental Conservation). Kelsey Mackey (National Park Service, IVUMC) and Maureen Finnerty (National Park Service) gave an overview of the [Visitor Use Management framework and guidebooks](#).



The VUM framework is adaptable to the planning processes and documents of federal and non-federal organizations. Many projects follow the framework or aspects of it without explicitly using the terminology or identifying as a project that uses the framework.

Presentations included:

- [IVUMC & VUM Framework and Guidebooks](#)
- [Parks Canada Perspective on Visitor Use Management](#)
- [Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands Perspective on Visitor Use Management](#)
- [NYSDEC Adoption of Visitor Use Management Framework](#)

Implementation Challenges and Opportunities

Workshop participants identified common challenges of implementing the VUM framework across their jurisdictions. Common challenges included:

- Capacity and funding for an iterative and long-term process
- Time and willingness to plan proactively
- Lack of baseline data
- Managing on a system-wide scale or across jurisdictions
- Getting buy-in

Workshop participants also identified opportunities for implementing VUM, which included:

- Building relationships and capacity
- Proactive, data-driven planning
- Improved visitor experience and resource conditions
- Allows you to recognize what is special about a place

Successes and Lessons Learned from Case Studies

Workshop participants heard from a range of case studies spanning jurisdictions and emphasizing different aspects of the VUM framework. Case Study presentations included:

- [Build the Foundation 1: Kingdom Trails \(Vermont\)](#)
- [Build the Foundation 2: New York State Department of Environmental Conservation \(NYSDEC\) VUM for Adirondacks and Catskills](#)
- [Define Visitor Use Management Direction 1: Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands](#)
- [Define Visitor Use Management Direction 2: Tennessee State Parks](#)
- Identify Management Strategies 1: Acadia National Park
- [Identify Management Strategies 2: Land and Garden Preserve \(Maine\)](#)
- [Implement, Monitor, Adjust 1: Trans Canada Trail](#)
- [Implement, Monitor, Adjust 2: White Mountain National Forest \(New Hampshire\)](#)



Lessons learned included:

- Involving stakeholders early in the process gives projects strong support and helps to account for all perspectives throughout the process.
- Partnerships with academic institutions, contractors, and others can help to increase the capacity for VUM projects. These partnerships can also bring needed expertise to teams, including social science or spatial analysis.

- It is helpful to define desired conditions and use them to make decisions when challenges arise.
- A range of methods exist for engaging stakeholders and the community, including advisory groups, public meetings, and inclusive language.
- There are new data collection techniques that may be especially useful in areas with low capacity for data collection (e.g., Strava, automated cameras).
- For some thresholds, the perspectives of managers and users may differ. In these cases, it is helpful to have input from recreational users.
- Different levels of recreation need different monitoring and management strategies. The sliding scale concept of the framework can be used to think about the level of monitoring or data collection that is needed for a visitor use management issue. Workshop participants were also excited about the strategy of identifying hotspots and focusing data collection and management efforts there.
- There are many benefits to working on multi-jurisdiction groups, as seen in the “recreationshed” working group example. It may also be helpful to include tourism agencies in VUM efforts.

Future Directions and Next Steps

At the end of the workshop, participants were discussed some of the key questions that VUM may address in the future.

How do we make VUM more approachable?

- Workshop participants agreed it is important to make the framework more digestible, less academic and more practical.
- Consistent marketing or branding of the framework may help to increase its recognition and adoption.
- We need to continue to work to normalize the VUM framework among practitioners. Emphasizing that the framework is internationally adopted, credible, and defensible may help in this effort.
- It is helpful to emphasize that the framework is adaptable and can be used to enhance current management decisions, make better future decisions, and fits into a range of agency or organization frameworks. Emphasize the sliding scale and ability to scale the process depending on the context.
- A checklist or tool kit may would be helpful for practitioners implementing the framework. This could include:
 - Standards for data collection for VUM
 - Updates on new tools and technology
 - Survey templates and tools
 - A quick solution template
 - A simplified worksheet for each step of the VUM process



How do we facilitate collaboration and partnerships to build capacity for VUM?

- A database of VUM studies and VUM plans would be a valuable resource. Submissions could be tagged by level of complexity, agency or organization, etc. to make the database easily searchable. Submissions could also include the plan’s RFP and cost.

- Mentorship between agencies who have carried out VUM and those who are considering a VUM project would be helpful. On a larger scale, being able to share successes and failures and learn from each other.
- Agencies starting the VUM process may need the support of social scientists, ecologists, or other experts. One avenue for increasing capacity that was suggested by participants was partnerships with graduate students and universities.
- A certificate program offered to students and professionals could help to increase capacity in the recreation community. This would also help to normalize professional development of VUM by making it a pathway.
- Resources for sustaining long-term, multi-jurisdiction partnerships would be valuable. In particular, the group was interested in grants or other ways to fund such partnerships.
- Continue to have conversations about VUM. Workshop participants suggested a working group, conversation threads, and additional workshops.
- SORP website as a way to continue conversations and collaborate

How does the VUM framework apply in places with less capacity?

The sliding scale concept is useful for these cases and should be emphasized in training materials.

Illustrate how to align an agency or organization's goals and strategic planning with the VUM framework.

Create a working group to think about VUM in places with less capacity specifically.

It would be helpful to see more case studies of the VUM framework implemented at a smaller scale, including in urban areas.

Workshop participants were interested in the possibility of expanding the Interagency Visitor Use Management Council.

How can we improve equitable access to recreation while managing visitor use?

It is necessary that people with a range of backgrounds are represented in the VUM planning process.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion should be included in the overall Visitor Use Management plan.

More research and strategies are needed to address inequities in emerging management strategies, notably reservation systems.

