



America's Great Outdoors Homegrown Listening Sessions

*A report prepared by Outdoor Industry Association and Outdoor Alliance,
with assistance from Appalachian Mountain Club, Colorado Mountain Club,
National Outdoor Leadership School, and The Mountaineers*

Submitted to

Nancy Sutley, Chair, White House Council on Environmental Quality
Ken Salazar, Secretary, U.S. Department of the Interior
Tom Vilsack, Secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture
Lisa Jackson, Administrator, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

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Introduction

On April 16, 2010, we were honored to represent the active outdoor business community and the human-powered outdoor recreation community at the White House Conference on America's Great Outdoors (AGO). From our perspective, President Obama's AGO memorandum evidenced a sea change in how our nation will approach our outdoor resources. First, the AGO Initiative boldly takes into account *all* communities (from young to mature, rural to urban, and people from all backgrounds and cultures) and *all* lands (state and federal, public and private, pristine and working) and creates the expectation that ownership, jurisdiction and community differences aside, the paths to better connect Americans to the outdoors must be found. Second, the AGO Initiative recognizes that while the federal government can help facilitate an enhanced connection to the outdoors, it certainly cannot do it alone and the best policies to enable these connections will arise from the grassroots, from the public. The ambitious Listening Session tour this summer attests to the President's commitment to generate input for the AGO Initiative from the ground up.

After attending the inaugural AGO event, we recognized we were in a unique position to augment AGO and committed to making the administration's initiative a success. Outdoor Alliance (a coalition of Access Fund, American Canoe Association, American Hiking Society, American Whitewater, International Mountain Bicycling Association and Winter Wildlands Alliance) represents millions of individual climbers, backcountry skiers, hikers, kayakers, canoeists, and mountain bikers, and Outdoor Industry Association (OIA) represents the thousands of outdoor businesses that contribute more than \$730 billion to the national economy and provide 6.5 million American jobs. By working together, OA and OIA could help educate and engage the active outdoor business community and the human-powered outdoor recreation user community about this seismic policy shift and channel our communities' knowledge and perspectives towards the AGO Initiative.

Soon after the inaugural AGO event, we learned from the Department of the Interior (DOI) and the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) that the Obama administration, in addition to looking for full and diverse attendance at its official listening sessions, welcomed communities and organizations efforts to host their own independent listening sessions. To this end, we decided to vigorously promote and encourage attendance from members of our community to all of the Obama administration's AGO Listening Sessions. Second, we decided to host our own "homegrown" listening sessions at strategic locations throughout the country and to compile what we learned into a report to CEQ, DOI, the Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Our hope was that the information we were able to channel could assist and or inform CEQ when it prepares the AGO Report, due to the President on November 15, 2010. This document is the report on what we learned in our homegrown listening sessions.

Homegrown Listening Sessions – Recruiting Partners and Developing the Concept and Tools

After agreeing to pursue a series of homegrown listening sessions, OA and OIA immediately reached out to three major regional outdoor clubs – the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC), the Colorado Mountain Club (CMC), and the Seattle-based Mountaineers. These outdoor leaders shared our view of the AGO Initiative and we created an informal working group to develop a scope, methodology, and itinerary for the homegrown listening sessions.

The basic idea for a homegrown listening session (HLS) was to host small, local events with anywhere from twenty to forty people. These smaller groups would address the same four questions as the Obama administration Listening Sessions, but in a setting that allowed the participants to delve a little deeper into the questions and, importantly, with a focus on recreation. Though there are plainly other aspects to the AGO Initiative, recreation is an area where our community can speak with authenticity. We recognized that the HLS must not compete with the administration’s AGO events and tried to select locations that were unlikely to be on the administration’s AGO itinerary. Another criterion for picking a HLS location was that at least someone in our working group had a strong local presence (*i.e.*, an outdoor company or member organization) to make sure that planning and execution could be pursued with confidence.

In an effort to keep each HLS focused on the four core questions, to attract diverse and compelling attendees, and to assure at least conceptual consistency across the HLS series, we developed two organizational tools to assist the people leading the HLS. First, we developed a toolkit we named a “Listening Session in a Box” or “LSB.” The LSB served as a top-line instruction manual for designing and organizing a HLS. The LSB addressed context, basic logistics, goals of the HLS, with the endpoint being a final report submitted to CEQ. The LSB is attached as Exhibit I to this document. To help with running each HLS in a consistent manner we also developed a “Moderator Tool Kit” to be used by the individuals tasked with leading the HLS and recording information collected at the various HLS. The Moderator Tool Kit is attached as Exhibit II to this document.

Homegrown Listening Sessions—Execution

We conducted eight HLS as summarized below:

Location	Date	Venue	Event Leader(s) and Organization(s)	Attendance
Jackson Hole, Wyoming	7-20	Teton Science School	Forrest McCarthy – Winter Wildlands Alliance Tom Flynn – Winter Wildlands Alliance	16
Boise, Idaho	7-21	The Falcon	Mark Menlove – Winter Wildlands Alliance	20
Boulder, Colorado	7-29	Leeds School of Business, University of Colorado	Alex Boian – Outdoor Industry Association David Weinstein – Outdoor Industry Association Bryan Martin – Colorado Mountain Club Kenny Ballard – Boulder Outdoor Specialty Group	19
Austin, Texas	8-17	Hill Country Galleria	Jennifer Mull – BACKWOODS, Inc. David Weinstein – Outdoor Industry Association	23
Portland, Oregon	8-18	Keen Footwear Headquarters	Thomas O’Keefe – American Whitewater David Weinstein – Outdoor Industry Association Chris Enlow – Keen Footwear Scott Welch – Columbia Sportswear	44
Boston, Massachusetts	8-18	Appalachian Mountain Club Headquarters	Heather Clish – Appalachian Mountain Club Faith Salter – Appalachian Mountain Club Janet Wyper – L.L. Bean Scot Balentine – L.L. Bean David Bryant – The Trustees of Reservations Christina McDermott – MA Audubon Society Margaret Bailey – Capital Hotel Management Chris Ann Goddard – CGPR Public Relations Dawn Chavez – Boston Youth Environment Network Mary Margaret Sloan – Student Conservation Association	45
Freeport, Maine	8-19	L.L. Bean Store	Scot Balentine – L.L. Bean Janet Wyper – L.L. Bean Bryan Wentzell – Appalachian Mountain Club Lindsay Bourgoine – Appalachian Mountain Club Kate Williams – Northern Forest Canoe Trail Jonathan LaBonte - Androscoggin Land Trust Mary Margaret Sloan – Student Conservation Association	46
Lander, Wyoming	8-25	Lander Valley High School	Jennifer Lamb – NOLS Aaron Bannon – NOLS Leslie Cook – Teton Science School Domenic Bravo – Wyoming State Parks and Historic Sites and Trails Darren Wells – Central Wyoming College Trout Unlimited	98

Detailed summaries of each listening session are attached as Exhibit III to this document.

Full listening session reports are attached as Exhibit IV to this document.

Homegrown Listening Sessions – a Synopsis of What We Learned

In reviewing results from all eight HLS, we were able to discern common threads as well as regional differences. Regarding the common threads, the first, overarching point of agreement is that the connection between recreation and conservation must be strengthened. A love and respect of outdoor places, often gained through outdoor recreation, engenders a sense of responsibility for lands that ultimately leads to conservation and active stewardship. In order to meet both recreation and conservation goals, a more diverse group of people must have better access and connection to recreation amenities and opportunities.

Within this larger context, seven important points emerged from the eight HLS.

1) Provide Adequate Funding

Adequate funding for programs aimed at improving recreation infrastructure and opportunities continues to be a critical need. Without money to build and maintain trails, improve access and transportation, or take advantage of volunteers, recreation suffers as does the long-term stewardship of our public lands. An opportunity exists to address the decades-old maintenance backlog with recreational facilities on public lands while providing important employment opportunities by establishing a 21st-century version of the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Specific Policy Recommendation:

- ✓ Full and dedicated funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund. LWCF is the single best source of funds for development and enhancement of local and federal protected areas and recreational amenities and it has never been more apparent than it is right now that the best use of extraction-generated revenues is for protection and restoration of our natural lands and waters. A robust Stateside LWCF helps assure close-to-home outdoor space and recreation; a healthy and strategically applied Federal Program can be used to purchase key in-holdings and access points to federal lands and waters and help connect fragmented landscapes. The U.S. House of Representatives has approved full, permanent funding for LWCF. The Obama administration should seize this moment and work with recreation communities to pass a full funding bill in the Senate.
- ✓ Create a National Recreation and Conservation Corps drawn upon and in the spirit of the Peace Corps, Americorps and the CCC. An NRCC would provide youth employment, engagement with conservation and stewardship values, and provide recreation infrastructure to get more Americans active and outdoors.

2) Address the Culture of Fear

The second point entails the ramifications for the American people and our public resources from a “culture of fear” that now exists around outdoor activities. Many Americans simply have little knowledge of, skills for or are afraid of, the outdoors. This results in fewer people – especially young people – enjoying the outdoors and an overbearing bureaucracy of liability, insurance and

other regulations. Federal agencies, teachers and mentors, who have some of the largest impacts on how people connect with the outdoors, are also those most limited by liability fears and the resulting bureaucracy.

Specific Policy Recommendations:

- ✓ Develop and promote adoption of a model recreational-use statute. A tremendous amount of outdoor recreation takes place through, or access is enabled by, private land owners. In certain jurisdictions liability concerns can cause private land owners to close otherwise acceptable recreational access. If the federal government developed a model recreational-use statute and championed the social benefits of the same, more states would adopt recreational use statutes and increased access to the outdoors would follow.
- ✓ Adequately fund resource management, visitor services and law enforcement on federal lands to enhance visitor enjoyment and adequately protect recreational, natural, cultural and heritage resources.
- ✓ Develop unified campaigns – led from the presidential level – to model the joys and benefits of outdoor recreation and active lifestyles.

3) Recognize and Support Partnerships

Partnerships need to be recognized and supported at the federal level. Whether between schools and small businesses, NGOs and government agencies, partnerships provide useful resource and information sharing. Many partners have demonstrated success attracting youth but face barriers in navigating the various requirements to implement their programs on public lands.

Specific Policy Recommendations:

- ✓ Significantly boost funding for and replicate the model of the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) Program. The RTCA program, operated by the National Park Service (NPS), builds partnerships between recreation organizations, state and local government agencies, and federal land managers to develop trails, conserve rivers, and provide valuable close-to-home recreation opportunities for millions of Americans. This small part of the NPS has been involved in some of the best recreation trail projects across the country, on land and water, and appears to be tailor made to meet many of the objectives spelled out in the AGO Initiative.
- ✓ Promote closer partnering between federal land managers and the human-powered and active outdoor communities and business to help design, manage and maintain recreational experiences on public lands. In difficult budgetary times, the federal government should look to harness the tremendous appetite for volunteer work from recreational users of public lands and the thousands of businesses whose economic wellbeing depends on accessible, healthy lands and waters. However, the definition of volunteer work should be expanded to include tasks other than trail maintenance and river clean-ups and partner with the human-powered groups and active outdoor businesses

when it comes to managing and designing sustainable recreational experiences on public lands – from trail design and selecting access points to monitoring resource use and social impacts.

- ✓ Modernize partnership authorities for all federal resource management agencies through legislation or regulation. Streamlining mechanisms for funding partners – such as Challenge Cost Share programs – will increase federal leverage on private sector and volunteer resources.
- ✓ Promote private land/public land partnerships as an avenue to keep working open spaces intact, maintain wildlife habitat, and increase access to recreation opportunities through “recreation easements” or similar incentives for private landowners.

4) Improve Public Engagement and Enhance Promotion of the Outdoors

Opportunities exist to promote the outdoors through new advertising and information outlets. People need better information about the recreation opportunities available, as well as better messaging to understand broad and interconnected conservation goals. Too often agencies focus on marketing to existing constituencies. There is a critical need to explore new technologies and venues to reach a broader spectrum of the American public.

Specific Policy Recommendations:

- ✓ Require that all federal land management agencies develop outreach strategies that focus on youth and diverse communities and employ the mediums of communication preferred by these audiences to connect to the outdoors. This means federal lands management agencies developing social media outlets, not just the development of content in different languages, with community-specific delivery (e.g., community foreign language newspapers, local radio, and festivals or farmer’s markets).
- ✓ Develop a consolidated, federal outdoor recreation information clearinghouse as the “go to” site for activities, destinations, reservations, regulations, permits, etc.

5) Expand and Develop Effective Youth Programs and the Means for Youth to More Easily Access the Outdoors

It is important to get kids into the outdoors early on. These sessions all agreed that it needs to be easier for teachers and mentors to take kids outside whether close-to-home or out on our public lands. In addition, public schools need to reverse the trend of reducing time devoted to physical education and play in the outdoors. Several key goals can be achieved by getting kids outdoors early that include building the next generation of stewards for our public lands. More important, early exposure to the outdoors can encourage active, healthy lifestyles with corresponding benefits to overall public health.

Specific Policy Recommendations:

- ✓ Grant teachers and mentors Good Samaritan status on outdoors trips.
- ✓ Connect urban areas and populations to local and regional outdoor resources via public transportation. Although many densely populated areas in this nation are surprisingly close to first-rate natural landscapes and waterways, many of these local treasures are inaccessible to large segments of the local population due to the lack of reasonable and affordable public transportation.
- ✓ Consider modifications to our existing education model: make outdoor education mandatory at all grade levels and reinstate the physical education requirement.

6) Protect Special Places

Protection and stewardship of public lands remain as important as ever and presidential leadership in this endeavor is critical to success. With competing demands for different activities on public lands, user conflicts, and differing opinions on establishing a conservation vision for the future, it is important that agencies regularly engage communities and provide forums for dialogue. Connecting spaces for wildlife and recreation both within communities and across the landscape is more important than ever.

Specific Policy Recommendation:

- ✓ Update the historical federal land management paradigm that tends to favor extractive use and better incorporate the protection and promotion of the human experiences that occur on lands and waters. A critical element in this paradigm shift is to more accurately measure the non-consumptive economic value of open space and natural resources. For example, the federal government is very adept at converting timber, hydropower resources, and ore and energy deposits into dollar figures and projecting how those dollar figures impact local and regional employment. While there has been notable progress from the private sector in measuring the active outdoor recreation economy, greater involvement by the federal government in this economic research will yield a more accurate picture still, and help guide better policy decisions.

7) View Recreation from the Landscape-Level

AGO has reinforced Americans penchant for and investment in open spaces and recreation infrastructure. From spectacular federal lands to urban parks and private developers' greenways, a vast patchwork of protected areas and outdoor recreation amenities is in place across America. Yet, critical components remain missing, connectivity is absent or lacking, and recreational access remains an issue from the urban core to remote federal lands.

AGO has highlighted the need for national leadership and landscape-level planning and execution on outdoor recreation infrastructure, the delivery of recreational services and how we ensure the long-term stewardship of these amenities.

Specific Policy Recommendation:

- ✓ Work at the landscape level on a unified national recreation infrastructure. The federal government can lead in the development of a national strategic framework, including land-management policies and on-the-ground practices that encourage the conservation, management, planning, design and enhancement of the physical infrastructure needed to experience America's great outdoors in a sustainable manner, including natural surface trails (water and snow trails included) and recreational access to rivers, lakes and shores. This initiative should be implemented in large part by local communities and supported over time by volunteer stewardship and citizen conservation; these attributes will assure that the initiative results in both a physical and social/community infrastructure that are mutually reinforcing. Proper recreation infrastructure planning can help link fragmented landscapes, ecosystems and human communities, and increase access to the outdoors.
- ✓ A focus on connectivity will provide immediate benefits and return on investment. Connecting existing parks, trails, riparian and wildlife corridors – and links both within urban areas and from urban to suburban to rural – will provide recreational, health and economic benefits to our communities.

Conclusion

Our American heritage is tied strongly to outdoor places and we have discovered impassioned and enthusiastic voices across the country in appreciation of the administration's grassroots initiative. A surprising and encouraging offshoot at a number of HLS has been the attendees' desire to share their regional report in group emails in order to continue the AGO conversation, and speak and network with one another about new partnerships that might be forged within their communities.

After designing and conducting these HLS across the country and also having the opportunity to summarize what we learned, we are even more convinced that the AGO Initiative's approach to better connecting the American people to their great outdoor spaces sets just the right tone for developing a conservation policy for the 21st century. We travelled to eight locations across the nation in order to garner the diversity of American sentiment; we engaged over 300 people to think really hard about the four AGO questions put forth by the administration; and we collected authentic and actionable recommendations offered above for the administration's consideration as lead agencies prepare their AGO report for President Obama this November.