

## 8/26 North Trail Study Area Plan Visitor Experience Expert Panel

Approximately 33 people attended the 8/26 North Trail Study Area (TSA) Plan Visitor Experience Expert Panel.

**Shelley Dunbar**, Open Space Board of Trustee member, welcomed the public to the expert panel event.

**Steve Armstead**, North TSA Project Lead, thanked Shelley and the board for their participation in the process as well as the community for their active engagement and participation in this plan and provided details about the planning process and next steps.

**Heather Bergman**, Peak Facilitation, informed the public that the goal of the expert panel was to hear new and creative ideas that other entities have used to improve visitor experience and trail sustainability. She elaborated that Open Space and Mountain Parks (OSMP) is looking forward to hearing what the public thinks are the best ideas from the expert panel to try in the North TSA. She noted that the ideas heard tonight may show up in one, some or none of the draft scenarios and thanked the panelists for their participation.

**Mike McHugh**, **Eldorado Canyon State Park Resource Technician** noted that sustainable trails need predictable maintenance and that all trails require maintenance. His management is focused on the 80% of visitors who just want to go for a hike/run/ride/climb, rather than the 10% who enthusiastically follow maps and read regulations or the other 10% who are out for a day of exploring and accomplish 90% of trail damage. Techniques that have worked well in Eldorado Canyon State Park include:

- Minimal or no signage
- Self-contained crews (with volunteer coordinator, invasive weed and re-vegetation staff, forester and trail builder on site to ensure sustainability and ownership)
- Data collection
- Extremes of slope (either not steep at all or >20% grade)
- Clearly defined structures such as staircases instead of one or two random steps
- Assistance from volunteers and the sense of stewardship it creates

**Dr. Rob Roy Ramey**, **President of Wildlife Science International, Inc.** suggested considering peer review of plan sections that deal with the most contentious issues to refine the plan. As part of peer review he suggested:

- Appointing someone to serve as editor
- Asking the right, close-ended questions and focusing on key issues.
- Ensuring completeness and transparency and providing all data including all cited papers and reports
- Paying reviewers so they will spend time looking at the issues in-depth
- Accepting changes or responding to each of the comments raised and posting questions and reviews online.

**R. Ramey** also suggested:

- Choosing language carefully (e.g. human-wildlife interactions instead of human disturbance of wildlife which assumes negative impacts.)
- Recreation may displace animals, but it doesn't necessarily mean that there is a negative impact to them or the population.
- Avoiding managing hypothetical threats as if they are real threats and diverting conservation resources away from far more pressing problems.
- "Best professional judgment" it is not a substitute for a thorough problem analysis and data.
- Ranking conservation priorities in terms of species and habitat and providing a defensible explanation for the rankings chosen.
- Planning ahead for identifying and quickly responding to emerging issues.
- Not losing sight of the big picture by thinking too locally.
- Reading: *Conservation in the Anthropocene: Beyond Solitude and Fragility* by Dr. Peter Kareiva, The Nature Conservancy

**Kim Frederick, Jefferson County Open Space Trails Services Supervisor** shared some of Jefferson County Open Space's management techniques that have worked well including:

- Activity specific trails and trailheads that connect into other multi-use trails.
- Direction of use (e.g. on odd days bikers must travel uphill only on specific trails to address high speeds of travel that may conflict with other activities)
- Alternating days for activities to create a feeling of solitude without creating numerous new trails and providing quality experiences for different visitor activities (e.g. on odd weekend days bikers may use the trails while on even weekend days the trails are open to hikers and equestrians.)
- Seasonal closures (both habitat and natural resource closures) with an on-trail requirement when the area is open to visitors.
- Trail difficulty ratings to provide visitors with good information to inform their decisions about which trails to use.
- Live parking lot web cams (so visitors can see what trailhead parking areas look like prior to going there). This is not inexpensive, but does provide a good service for visitors so they can make more informed decisions about where they go.

He noted that it is much more challenging to make changes to existing use patterns and much easier to implement certain techniques on new trails that don't already have established use patterns.

In order to learn more and better determine which techniques have been most effective, Jefferson County Open Space has a Volunteer Stakeholder Group that is providing feedback through surveys on the county's spatial and temporal management changes and whether they have been good, tolerable, or bad for visitors.

Jefferson County Open Space also has a robust volunteer stewardship program that greatly enhances their trail system.

**Joel Frank**, Consultant and former Chief of Tourism for the U.S. National Park Service suggested:

- An asset building approach (seeking out the best of what is to help imagine what could be)
- Problem-solving by recognizing and doing less of the things that we don't do well.
- Considering what we value most about our community, what keeps tourists coming back, and what we would like to share with them. Consider what the value added benefit is.
- Continuing OSMP's proactive and progressive approach to visitor experience.

**Visitor Experience Panelist Questions and Answers:**

***Q: Please speak to trail design standards and what role they play in visitor compliance.***

**M. McHugh** responded that visitor experience is the most important element to consider with trail design standards and has to come first.

**K. Frederick** noted that this requires balancing art and science with available resources and that there is lots of opportunity for thoughtful consideration.

**J. Frank** mentioned that existing trailheads/structures may need to be changed and updated to remain up to standards as things evolve.

***Q: Do you have recreation specialists on staff?***

Both **K. Frederick** and **M. McHugh** responded that their staff includes recreation specialists.

***Q: Did you have a problem overcoming a cultural bias toward trail construction?***

**K. Frederick** responded that Jefferson County Open Space didn't need to overcome this bias. He noted that OSMP seems to manage the resources they have given the means they have available.

In response to a clarifying question, **K. Frederick** confirmed that Jefferson County Open Space's total trail mileage is about 230 miles and visitation is approximately 2.5 million visits per year and are quite different from Boulder's trail mileage and visitation.

***Q: How do you deal with weed introduction issues?***

**K. Frederick** answered that Jefferson County Open Space uses both mechanical and chemical weed management techniques. He noted that weed introduction hasn't been too critical an issue yet, but they do manage for invasive species- especially within the past year.

**M. McHugh** noted that the classification of invasive species might be a better thing to consider when managing invasive species. In Eldorado Canyon State Park certain Class B or C invasive species are treated as Class A if they spread very easily. Invasive species with sticky seeds are managed more tightly because of how easily they spread.

***Q: How do you plan for visitation types and numbers?***

**J. Frank** noted that this is often done reactively, while ideally, it should be done more proactively. He suggested trying to be ahead of the curve by determining who your visitors are and what good things you want to share with them. He mentioned that the City of Boulder Open Space and Mountain Parks plans well for its visitors through proactive thinking and action and should continue its proactive and progressive approach.

**K. Frederick** mentioned that it would be great to be able to plan for visitation types and numbers, but that this is difficult to predict. Jefferson County Open Space uses projections to plan for parking needs, etc. but projections aren't always accurate and certain aspects (e.g. floods, invasive species, etc.) can't be planned for. He noted that some reactive (rather than proactive) management is necessary because our environment is dynamic.

**M. McHugh** noted that in Eldorado, climbing use is growing. Forward-thinking actions that are being employed include building big, sustainable trails and doing outreach and education to visitor groups to create stewards.

**J. Frank** added that a framework (of statistics, data and baseline analytics) can be built in order to guesstimate visitation types and numbers.

***Q: What is being done to manage the demand for Elk Meadow Park where there are 80 acres of trail where dogs off leash are permitted?***

**K. Frederick** replied that there is a great deal of interest and use of this area which is impacted by loss of vegetation, recreation density, and dog guardians not cleaning up after dogs. Jefferson County Open Space is making changes to parking areas, providing stewards for the site to provide education to visitors about their impacts and encouraging them to do on-trail use only. Jefferson County Open Space has not considered creating more dog off-leash opportunities to disperse this activity from this location.

***Q: It is important to frame and ask the right questions regarding wildlife and human interactions. Please give us examples of whether negative assumptions existed regarding this topic.***

**Dr. R. Ramey** replied that there was an assumption that humans could impact wildlife- in the example he provided during his presentation, specifically that humans could and would impact bighorn sheep negatively. It is important to observe and rank the impacts of things. He suggested that trail effect be broken down beyond generalized impacts and specifically note what is being impacted: (e.g. wildlife breeding, rearing, etc.). He felt that cause and effect mechanisms should be clearly defined.

***Q: How are your organizations' budgets?***

**K. Frederick** responded that a ½ percent sales tax provides Jefferson County Open Space with its funding and that its current budget is solid and continues to grow.

**M. McHugh** noted that state parks no longer receive state general fund money. Therefore, Eldorado Canyon State Park relies only on entrance fees. He said that this puts pressure on the park to entice more visitors for more revenue. He would prefer the park to be more focused on managing use and not just on bringing in visitors to create more revenue.

### **Small group discussions:**

Discuss what idea you heard from panelists that you'd like to see in the North TSA and why?

### **Ideas Liked Best for Inclusion in the Plan**

#### **Group 1:**

- Supported separating trails by activity (spatially) and by day (temporally), but expressed concern about increasing the number of trails to include all desired uses.
- Supported considering the pitfalls that **R. Ramey** presented around peer review and felt that the North TSA Plan needs to be reviewed continuously by staff.
- Supported equal separation of uses to ensure there is not a "2<sup>nd</sup> class of recreationists"
- Supported high quality of trails defined by:
  - Interesting visitor experience
  - Single-track (not using old agricultural roads as bike trails)
  - Sinuosity – variability in trail experience is important
  - Presence of diverse wildlife
  - Incorporation of topography and flora into the trail experience
  - Accessible viewpoints
- Monitoring and analysis of data is critically important; as is asking the right questions.
- Supported web cams at trailhead parking lots to enhance visitor experience.

#### **Group 2:**

- Agreed with the idea that human use and conservation values aren't mutually exclusive
- Supported providing positive visitor experience (through fewer, simpler signs/positive messaging/interesting trail design and improved sustainability)
- Agreed with the idea that all trails need maintenance
- Supported focusing on what can be done that is positive and creating a sense of stewardship
- Supported valuing and incorporating volunteers, but also recognized the staff supervision this requires.

#### **Group 3:**

- Suggested ensuring that the experience of other jurisdictions is analogous to OSMP and the North TSA before adopting their approaches
- Supported the need to consider financial constraints and take care of backlogged maintenance and recognize that new trails add to on-going maintenance and workload.

- Supported implementing similar directional and temporal restrictions used by Jefferson County Open Space since they are useful visitor management techniques with the caveat that staff resources/ability to enforce for compliance needs to be considered.
- Noted that solitude is important and that additional usage shouldn't be encouraged by OSMP.
- Agreed that off-leash dogs effect visitor experience adversely.
- Supported exploring the variety of dog rules used by Jefferson County Open Space.
- Supported looking at the possibility of opening the Feeder Canal Trail, but also respecting private property owners' rights and desires.
- Supported considering the rare plant communities in the North TSA and acknowledging that weed control will be a major issue.
- Noted that peer review as recommended by R. Ramey isn't practical given the time constraints of the North TSA.

**Group 4:**

- Supported evaluating human activity in areas before building trails.
- Supported quantifying the impacts of trails over time so the community can reach agreement about what to do.
- Supported webcams at trailhead parking lots.
- Supported directing /diverting people from OSMP lands to Jefferson County Open Space since they have half as many visitors and twice as many trails as OSMP.
- Supported quantifying specific wildlife/bird impacts; e.g. trail impacts to nesting vs. brooding wildlife
- Supported using similar documentation of compliance techniques as Jefferson County Open Space (such as surveys, cameras, experiments, etc.) to better understand maintenance and management needs to ensure effective management techniques are being used.
- Supported using volunteers in technical trail building aspects.
- Noted that trail building, maintenance, and weed control are one package.
- Supported using signage made with natural materials.