



Collaborative Conversation: Visitor Capacity, Congestion, and Visitor Experience in the Lake Tahoe Basin, Point Lobos State Park and Muir Woods National Monument

SUMMARY

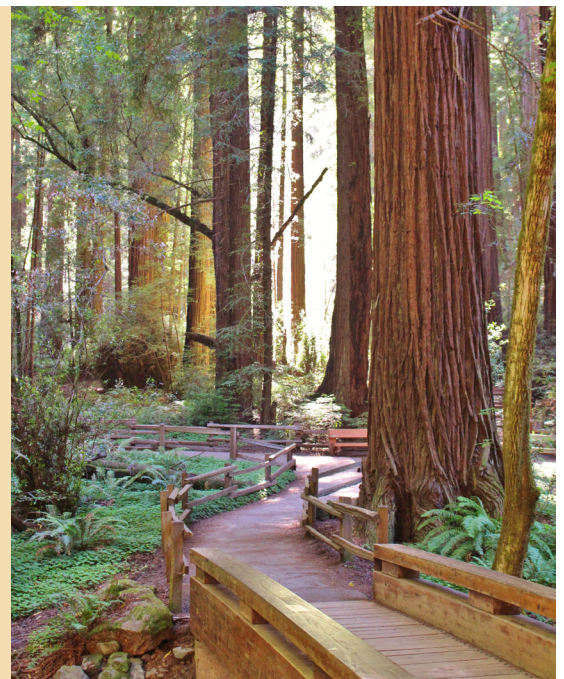
In June 2018, staff from the Lake Tahoe Basin, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, Tamalpais Lands Collaborative and Point Lobos gathered at Muir Woods National Monument for a conversation on visitor capacity, public access, and traffic management. Muir Woods recently eliminated a large percentage of road-side parking along the narrow entrance to the park and implemented a reservation system for parking after overcrowding and traffic in the monument came to an untenable level. In Lake Tahoe, managers are facing a similar situation on their roadways and recreation areas basin-wide, particularly in hot spot attractions such as Emerald Bay State Park. Point Lobos is experiencing similar challenges with managing increased visitor use.

As Lake Tahoe and Point Lobos explore solutions to its congestion and resource protection challenges, staff found it very valuable to learn from the approaches used at Muir Woods, including (1) how the Monument looked at capacity and its effect on visitor experience, (2) what infrastructure changes were made to meet the changed visitor management approach at the Monument, (3) how the public engagement process was designed, specifically its adaptability to community and political issues and the hiring of a dedicated individual, and (4) key lessons learned on the public rollout of the new system.

The National Parks Service staff also found this exchange to be helpful for their team as they reflected on the years of hard work that went into implementation of this novel idea and approach, and to learn about similar or different struggles that other land managers and planners are working on.

LESSONS LEARNED

- ▶ **Having a model to point to helps leaders and implementers in other areas be less risk adverse in thinking outside the box. It can be done!**
- ▶ **The vital role of bold and supportive leadership, dedicated staff, and relationship building with the public cannot be underscored enough.**
- ▶ **There is a great opportunity to continue the exchange of information on how to measure, target, and talk about visitor capacity and how it relates to and affects the visitor experience.**



PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS

- Bold leaders willing to take risks was vital to success, including involving Congressman Huffman to lead a collaborative stakeholder group.
- Muir Woods was able to engage a high profile congressman in convening a stakeholder group which made huge gains in building a shared solution and political support for the project.
- Being held accountable and then delivering is a point of pride for Muir Woods staff. The Park has since hired a recreation ecologist who will support the monitoring of both visitor and resource capacity indicators as a part of the implementation work
- NPS staff was able to discuss capacity issues in an open way by dealing with it as targets and using a flexible approach.
- For Muir Woods, the agency set the vision and spirit they wanted for visitor experience; much of the “overcapacity” conversation was driven by the public.
- The Tahoe staff is interested in looking at how the methodology and modeling was completed, to inform the development of capacity targets and performance metrics.
- All of the Collaborative Conservation participants are dealing with very common problems. We are not alone!
- Relationship building with stakeholders and the public is always a key component. In the case of the Muir Woods project, staff realized they underestimated the both public concerns and the public’s readiness to understand and embrace a new approach. More time was needed in the early phase to build relationships and educate stakeholders on the issues.



PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS

- This made some Tahoe staff stop and think: where are we with the public on our challenge?
- The Huffman collaborative stakeholder group used an innovative approach of having key stakeholders commit to agreements on a public stage (literally) which held the group accountable to the public.
- The Muir Woods team did it! It can be done. It is inspiring to see there is a light at the end of the tunnel as Lake Tahoe begins to tackle its difficult access and capacity issues.
- Staff like Mia Monroe (Marin Community Liaison) have longevity, have “Teflon” skin, and have a deep passion and commitment to the resource and the stakeholders play a critical role in relationship building and the project’s success.
- It is exciting to see what good government can do. It is important to share these stories of public agencies collaborating and working on good projects for the good of the public.
- These projects do not happen overnight. There are many moving parts that must come together.
- Future public land management will be influenced by new novel approaches.
- Interesting that the reservation system is seen as so novel when we use reservation systems in so many other areas of our regular lives.
- Muir Woods was able to implement an online reservation system despite limited connectivity and cell service. Tahoe faces the same issue and this shows it can be done.
- Muir Woods worked to strike a balance between parking capacity and visitor experience by maximizing every spatial opportunity within the park to address both at the same time.
- Great to have a model that we can point to and emulate. Makes risk-averse partners or organizations more likely to try a new approach.
- Utilizing new technology such as the reservation system allows for new opportunities for data collection that can be extremely useful for land managers
- The Muir Woods has an interesting model to study with the shuttle system being operated by a concessionaire.
- Online systems are a great opportunity for data collection of who is visiting which can help with future planning.
- Conducting an assessment of the park and infrastructure was a good point of the process: it revealed things we already knew but was a foundational piece.
- This is the tip of the iceberg, lets continue to collaborate more!

COLLABORATIVE CONVERSATIONS are a series of dialogues convened by the California Landscape Stewardship Network. Across the state of California, public land managers and stewards are working together to restore and preserve natural areas for the public to enjoy. While these natural landscapes vary across the state by their different topographies, wildlife species, and recreational opportunities, these managers often struggle with the same issues. Balancing conservation with public access, working across jurisdictions and political differences, and working with limited resources are a guarantee when it comes to this line of work. The California Land Stewardship Network convenes groups working on these challenging issues to have “collaborative conversations” that allow for exchange of ideas and lessons learned to problem solve together and share creative solutions.

For more information, visit:

www.landscapeconservation.org/california-landscape-stewardship-network
or email info@calandscapestewardshipnetwork.org