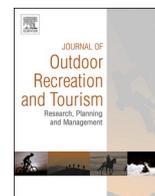


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Research Article

Contemporary issues, opportunities, and resources for the U.S. outdoor recreation profession



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand the contemporary issues, opportunities, and resource needs of U.S. outdoor recreation professionals. In Spring 2021, we conducted focus groups with members of the Society of Outdoor Recreation Professionals and Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education. Iterative qualitative analysis of professionals' perspectives using both inductive and matrix coding yielded key themes including: 1) justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI), 2) social-ecological health, 3) societal demand, 4) industry direction, and 5) professional identity. While certain themes (i.e., JEDI) existed in previous trends studies, others illustrate the relative novelty of professionals' experiences of the outdoor recreation boom both pre- and during the COVID-19 pandemic. In sum, we provide an inventory of current issues, opportunities, and resource needs for outdoor recreation professionals, which can inform future advocacy and planning by professional organizations. *Management implications:* The overall development in the field of outdoor recreation will be influenced by the aspects:

- Key issues will be 1) justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI), 2) social-ecological health, 3) societal demand, 4) industry direction, and 5) professional identity.
- JEDI was the most salient theme across organizational membership affiliation, indicating the importance of ongoing social justice efforts led by the outdoor recreation industry.
- Participants' focus on the negative ecological health impacts and positive human health benefits stemming from outdoor recreation solidly situates the industry within One Health and other ongoing public health efforts.
- In some cases, different needs exist across the supply and demand segments of the outdoor recreation profession, particularly related to professional identity and livable wages.
- Workforce development opportunities include, but are not limited to, investment and training in community and stakeholder engagement through SCORP processes, planning for social media's influence of recreation resources, and additional human resources to adapt to surging demand.

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” – William Faulkner
In 2019, shortly after the United States (U.S.) Congressional Budget

Office began scoring the outdoor recreation industry for its economic impact, the Bureau of Economic Analysis attributed \$788 billion in

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revenue from outdoor recreation to the U.S. gross domestic product (2.1%; U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2020). This economic indicator is one signal of the surging societal importance of nature-based outdoor recreation, with more people visiting outdoor recreation spaces, such as parks and protected areas, worldwide, than ever before (Outdoor Industry Association [Outdoor Industry Association, 2021]. Internationally, roughly 8 billion individuals set foot in protected areas annually (Balmford et al., 2015). This global growth is, in part, due to increased access to information about parks and protected areas through online sources (i.e., social media; Wengel et al., 2022) and greater acknowledgment of the health benefits derived from outdoor recreation (Zingmark et al., 2021). In the U.S., between 2010 and 2019, visitation to national parks increased by more than 50 million (National Park Service, 2021). And while overall visitation in 2020 decreased due to closures and international travel restrictions stemming from the SARS CoV 19 pandemic (hereafter, 'COVID-19' or 'the pandemic'), 15 U.S. parks still set new entrance records (National Park Service, 2021). Further, prior to and resultant from the pandemic, state and local parks witnessed even higher growth in visitation, indicative of a trend towards localized, urban recreation (e.g., Smith et al., 2019; Volenec et al., 2021). Suffice it to say, in the U.S. outdoor recreation is booming, and recent global events cemented the importance of access to nature-based outdoor recreation opportunities.

In response to this record growth, U.S. industry working groups such as the OIA and Outdoor Economic Roundtable, State Offices of Outdoor Recreation and professional organizations, such as the Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education and the Society of Outdoor Recreation Professionals, are at cross-roads, seeking to both capitalize on increased demand and overall industry growth and respond to new and enduring challenges (e.g., Askew & Bowker, 2018). This is, in part, because the scale and rate of growth relate to a host of unintended consequences: impacts to the spaces where outdoor recreation occurs (e.g., litter, overwhelmed sanitation facilities, etc.) increase as visitor numbers rise (National Park Service, 2021) and the rate of new outdoor recreationists, unaccustomed to rules, regulations and outdoor ethics, also increases (Smith et al., 2019). There are also enduring challenges to ensuring these spaces are and remain relevant to the communities most proximate, whether in rural or urban environments (e.g., Schirpke et al., 2018). And recent frank and necessary discourse arising from social justice and antiracist movements begs the question of what barriers remain impacting accessibility to outdoor recreation or unconscious biases permeate the industry (e.g., Warner & Dillenschneider, 2019). Coupled with visitation and the challenge of equitable access is the reality many outdoor recreation opportunities are dependent upon stable and predictable climatic and environmental conditions (e.g., Smith et al., 2018). As the local, regional, and global climate becomes increasingly variable and unstable, outdoor recreation professionals (ORPs) are facing dynamic and challenging decisions on how to manage nature-based outdoor recreation settings (e.g., O'Toole et al., 2020).

In the U.S., these recent events, along with enacted legislation (i.e., Great America Outdoor Act; HR57) and potential policy initiatives (i.e., Replant Act, 30x30 Initiative, Climate Corps; Congressional Research Service, 2021), called us to inventory the current state of the outdoor recreation profession. A detailed inquiry focused on the work of ORPs is crucial for numerous mutually related reasons. First, ORPs are entrusted with stewarding the nation's public land and water resources (i.e., state and national forests, parks, rivers, seashores, trails, wildlife refuges, etc.) and the outdoor recreation experiences therein, as guides, educators, programmers, and managers. Despite recent industry growth, there is a disproportionate lack of focus on what professionals state they need to allow them to meet surging demand. Second, the scope of the ORP is admittedly broad. Outdoor educators, resource managers, conservation stewards, and technically-proficient leaders of recreational activities wear many hats (e.g., Seaman et al., 2017), increasingly as facilitators of social and environmental justice (e.g., Hicks et al., 2020). Third, previous studies of contemporary issues in outdoor recreation and leisure

studies primarily focused on users and use, within a spectrum of visitor use planning, management, satisfaction or in the development of behavior profiles (Cole, 1999; Crompton & Kaczynski, 2003; Hornback, 1980; Warnick, 2002). Fiscal constraints, staffing, equitable access, and representation experience consistent, albeit lesser focus in research (e.g., Manning, 2011; Pitas et al., 2017). Further, studies of ethnic and minority underrepresentation largely center on differences in recreation behavior, style, and visitation patterns (Bobilya et al., 2010; Gramann, 1996, as opposed to how professionals think about and respond to contemporary issues and trends. Finally, contemporary issues, exhibit variable self-lives – some are enduring while others emerge or evolve over decades (c.f., Bobilya et al., 2010), following the zeitgeist of a time, such a global pandemic of indeterminate length or a string of egregious and highly-publicized murders (i.e., Ahmaud Arbury, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd).

Accordingly, we argue an inventory of the current state of the ORP in the U.S. is warranted. This national focus does not neglect transferable experiences present for ORPs internationally (e.g., Mackintosh et al., 2018), but rather provides one national assessment to compare to other settings (e.g., Australia; Spennemann & Whitsed, 2021). To achieve this end, we partnered with two leading outdoor recreation organizations in the U.S., the Society of Recreation Professionals (SORP) and the Association of Recreation Educators (AORE), to understand professionals' perspectives. In Spring of 2021, we conducted a series of focus groups with a pragmatic purpose: to identify the most salient and important issues ORPs face, opportunities they see and resources that can be provided by professional organizations, practitioners, scholars, legislatures, and the outdoor recreation community at large. To paraphrase William Faulkner (1951), 'the past and present inform the future,' and, as such, a multidisciplinary awareness of contemporary issues that influence ORPs will inform future outdoor recreation scholarship, management, and the efforts of facilitating agencies that work with this increasingly essential workforce.

1. Contemporary issues scholarship

Contemporary issues in outdoor recreation reflect broader sociological, political, economic, and environmental issues of an era (Manning, 2011). In the U.S., recreation studies of the 1950's and 1960's sought to understand recreation behaviors born of an expansion of leisure time following World War II. In the 1970's, the focus shifted to the impact of gas shortages, inflation, and crowding on recreation and visitation to national parks, and, in the 1980's, the rise in dual-income families, with longer commutes and less leisure time (e.g., Hornback, 1980; Wingo, 1964). As Manning (2011) implies, outdoor recreation researchers' responses to these sociocultural and environmental realities fill gaps in literature and often lead to new lines of inquiry. Building on earlier visitor-centric studies, subsequent research in the 21st century focuses on issues such as environmental and social impacts of anthropogenic climate change (Middleton, 2018), underrepresentation of and discrimination experienced by diverse groups (e.g., Hicks et al., 2020), the role of technology in outdoor recreation spaces (e.g., Edwards et al., 2020), and recreation's linkage to physical and mental health (e.g., Craig et al., 2020; Hendricks et al., 2019).

1.1. Defining the profession

While certain themes span or are isolated to specific temporal periods, the term 'outdoor recreation' amalgamates diverse fields in theory and practice (e.g., Cole, 1999; Mackenzie & Hodge, 2020; Manning, 2011). Outdoor recreation can be defined as broadly as recreation occurring outdoors, or ostensibly, through specific physical activities occurring in a nature-based environment. Outdoor recreation can be construed as a weekend of camping, mountain biking, hiking, skiing (Schirpke et al., 2018), horseback riding (Askew et al., 2018), fishing (Craig et al., 2020), and even motorized nature-based activities (i.e.,

scenic driving) (Virginia Department of Recreation and Conservation, 2018). Outdoor recreation can be considered a medium through which adventure education (Bobilya et al., 2010; Mackenzie & Hodge, 2020), outdoor experiential learning (e.g., Edwards et al., 2020), and facilitated experiences (e.g., guiding) are conducted (Fossgard & Stensland, 2021). Suffice it to say, outdoor recreation's definition largely depends on the social, managerial, or policy context in which it is applied. For our inquiry, we operationalized the term using the Society of Outdoor Recreation Professionals' definition: "activities undertaken for leisure, mental and physical health, spirituality, or other reasons that take place outdoors and are typically dependent on a nature-based environment."

1.2. Studying contemporary issues

Contemporary issues inquiries are not isolated to our field. Contemporary studies in law (Pribán, 2017), human (Baumgartner & Flores, 2018) and veterinary medicine (Greter et al., 2014), as well as in the environmental sciences (Middleton, 2018), all evidence the dual purpose of providing insight to current trends and issues, as well as a validation (or refutation) of earlier research. These inquiries do not always change precedent, yet they provide social science inquiry centered on how a field is both influenced and influences the political, cultural, and economic realms. For example, contemporary socio-legal scholarship examined "the many forms and foci of law" as an instrument of governance (Phelan & Gostin, 2017), while contemporary medical-ethical inquiries explore preference for a modified Hippocratic Oath (Baumgartner & Flores, 2018). Social-ecological change and public health crises serve as catalysts for these types of inquiries: the opioid crisis, for example, yielded diverse scholarship centered on the crisis' implication on medical professionals (e.g., Stoicea et al., 2019).

Within outdoor recreation and leisure studies, the shared objective of contemporary issues inquiries (e.g., Bobilya et al., 2010; Cole, 1999; Spennemann & Whitsed, 2021) is to improve societal well-being, as well as forward future scholarship and management. Previous efforts in our field employed numerous approaches. For example, Bobilya et al. (2010) used an expert panel to tease out trends and issues considered "most germane" to the outdoor recreation field, then validated those through a series of conference workshops. Pitas et al. (2017) updated earlier analysis of trends in parks and recreation financing and staffing; their research replicates Crompton and Kaczynski's (2003) study comparing data from 1964 to 2000 to that from 2001 to 2015. Systematic literature reviews can be particularly effective to evaluate decadal patterns (i.e., summer camp staff experiences) (Warner et al., 2021) and panel samples focused on acute societal trends can be efficiently gather data (i.e., COVID-19 pandemic; OIA, 2021). In this study, we relied on a qualitative focus group approach with ORPs to understand the contemporary issues, opportunities, and resource needs they see in their work.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Method

A virtual, focus group method was selected for this study, first, due to the geographic range of participants' primary work location and, secondly, due to public health guidelines for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention related to the pandemic. We also chose to use a qualitative approach involving participant interaction due to the ability for focus groups to allow for follow-up questions, clarification, and dialogue among participants (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). As Stewart and Shamdasani (2015, p. 47) detail, the focus group method offers benefits over one-on-one interviews through the potential for synergy between participants' shared experiences, snowballing with specific topics of shared interest, social stimulation, security in numbers, and spontaneity in deciding to which questions to respond. Additionally, since our focus lacked a particularly sensitive topic of inquiry and the opportunity existed for participants to assist in addressing pressing

issues for their profession, focus groups were advantageous over individual interviews or questionnaires (Wutich et al., 2010). Finally, the documented success of focus groups to elicit meaningful, action-oriented findings for management of outdoor recreation experiences within a diversity settings and populations (e.g., Craig et al., 2020; Edwards et al., 2020), supports this approach.

2.2. Sample

In December 2020, we contacted both Executive Directors and Boards of Directors of SORP and AORE regarding their willingness to support focus group research with their respective memberships. These two organizations were selected due to their long history supporting outdoor recreation opportunities and programming, primarily in the U. S., as well as the potential to represent both the supply (i.e., outdoor recreation opportunities) and demand (i.e., programmers, guides, trip leaders) sides of outdoor recreation profession. Informally convened in 1984, AORE was formally incorporated in 1993 and their membership of over 600 is composed primarily of outdoor recreation and education professionals working in nonprofits (i.e., colleges and universities). Many of these individuals direct, coordinate, or facilitate co-curricular, non-credit bearing outdoor recreation opportunities (i.e., outdoor trips, rock wall programming, etc.) for university communities. According to the organization, AORE serves as a "mechanism to interact with and affect decisions made by public land managers and the human powered outdoor recreation industry." SORP, in contrast, is largely populated by the public land managers who AORE seeks to influence. Founded in 1984, the organization was originally incorporated as the National Association of Recreation Resource Planners and convened to support Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) development related to U.S. Land and Water Conservation Fund disbursements. Accordingly, membership of over 700 professionals consists largely of U. S. state and federal land managers, as well as nonprofit and outdoor industry representatives.

Following our initial inquiry to both organizations, the Executive Directors of SORP and AORE charged us with exploring and reporting actionable findings they could use in their future efforts to support their organizational membership. This feedback, in part, informed our interview protocol (Table 1), specifically regarding the expansion of questions related to desired resources or training needs. Additionally, given each Executive Director's interest in whether participants found the

Table 1
Sample semi-structured interview protocol for outdoor recreation professionals.

Sequence	Questions
Introductions	- Please introduce yourself by sharing where you currently work and a 1-minute overview of your professional journey as an outdoor recreation professional
Perspectives about the outdoor recreation profession	- How do you define the outdoor recreation profession? - Please describe the biggest issues facing the outdoor recreation field. - Please describe the biggest opportunities right now for the outdoor recreation field.
Resources needed by the profession	- What resources can organizations like SORP/AORE provide to help meet the issues you face or opportunities ahead for outdoor recreation professionals? - What other resources from industry, state, or federal government entities would help outdoor recreation professionals address the most pressing challenges and opportunities ahead?
Reflection	- What else would you like to share regarding any of the themes we've discussed (or not discussed) today?

Note. The semi-structured nature of the interview process allowed for additional follow-up questions and participant directed lines of inquiry.

“ORP” semantic inclusive or exclusive, we added a question focusing on this potential issue. After securing organizational support and human subjects approval at Old Dominion University, we employed a census sampling approach, whereby the full membership of both organizations was contacted by email from their respective organization. Targeted invitations were also sent from SORP Board members to specific individuals, and additional follow-up invitations were sent to 2020 and 2021 AORE committee ($n = 41$) and affinity group members ($n = 64$). Over the 12-day sampling period, 39 individuals (AORE = 16; SORP = 23) expressed interest.

All individuals who expressed interest and were current members of one of the organizations were then invited to participate in virtual focus groups using Zoom in mid-March 2021. Ultimately, 13 AORE and 11 SORP members chose to participate in one of four focus groups. In an analysis of the sufficient number of focus groups to discover dominant themes, Guest and colleagues (Guest et al., 2017) illustrated that – out of the 40 focus groups they conducted in their inquiry – three were sufficient to illustrate the most prevalent themes. In our study, each focus group was led by a combination of three researchers, including the corresponding author present on each interview. Interviews employed a semi-structured protocol to elicit contemporary issues, opportunities, and resource needs. The four focus groups were recorded using the closed-captioning feature in Zoom to access a downloaded transcription. The four transcripts were then cleaned by one research assistant using audio and video files for editing.

2.3. Analysis

Our analytic process was iterative. First, eight researchers individually participated in first round coding using *in vivo* or descriptive codes (Saldaña, 2013), wherein four researchers (Team AORE) focused on the two AORE transcripts, while a separate four (Team SORP) focused on the SORP transcripts. Second, following individual coding, the AORE and SORP Teams engaged within their respective teams in multiple intercoder meetings to discuss salient codes and identify themes (c.f., Zajchowski et al., 2019 for similar process). At this point, we decided as a team to not to label COVID-19 its own theme, as it permeated many of the other emerging themes. For example, as other researchers document (e.g., Spennemann & Whitsed, 2021) and was evident in our sample, measures enacted to manage the spread of the virus exacerbated existing contemporary issues facing outdoor recreation professionals (e.g., crowding, etc.), while increased participation in outdoor recreation in the U.S. was perceived by our participants as creating opportunities due to the pandemic to reach a wider more diverse audience. This is not to diminish COVID as a ‘contemporary issue’ of the time that all ORPs stated, but our analytic process allowed us to highlight the ways in which the pandemic interacted with the other themes that emerged from the focus group dialogues.

Next, to assist in thematic development, each team used matrix coding (Miles et al., 2014), sorting relevant codes into three categories: contemporary issues, opportunities, or training needs for the outdoor recreation profession. Main themes transcended each of the three main categories. Fourth, following matrix development at the within-organization level, the two teams compared their matrices and participated in multiple additional intercoder meetings to create a shared matrix of main themes that transcended organizational affiliation. Fifth, once main themes were agreed upon, each researcher focused on one theme identified by the full team and engaged in analytical memoing related to the theme (Miles et al., 2014). Finally, all individual thematic written sections were compared by the lead and corresponding author and the final theme matrix was developed representing the perceptions from across both organizations and all researchers.

3. Results

3.1. Sample

A total of 24 members from either AORE ($n = 13$) or SORP ($n = 11$) participated in one of four focus groups. Participants held a collective 342 years in the outdoor recreation profession, with an average of 14.25 years and a median of 10.5 years of professional experience. The average age of participants was 42.6 years old years old. 87.5 percent of focus group participants completed an anonymous post-hoc questionnaire, which sought additional demographic information. All individuals who completed this final brief questionnaire self-identified as White or Caucasian and Not of Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin. 12 individuals identified as female (57.1%), four identified as male, and one identified as gender non-binary. Four participants did not complete the open-ended gender-identity question. When responding to the highest level of education obtained, 57.1 percent ($n = 12$) of participants indicated a master’s degree, 14.3 percent ($n = 3$) a doctoral degree, and the remaining six individuals a bachelor’s degree (28.6%). Finally, in terms of organizational affiliation, SORP participants held a diversity of positions within the public and nonprofit sectors (Table 2), while the overwhelming majority of AORE attendees ($n = 12$; 92.3%) worked for higher education institutions, primarily in co-curricular roles.

3.2. Themes

Upon analysis of the interviews, several themes emerged across all focus groups: 1) justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion, 2) social-ecological health, 3) societal demand, and 4) industry direction. The sole exception was the professional identity theme that emerged in response to the question of defining the outdoor recreation profession; this theme almost exclusively resulted from AORE focus groups. We first detail the themes shared across all groups, in each subsection presenting the issues raised within each theme, opportunities present, and then resources or needs expressed by participants.

3.2.1. Justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion

The theme of social justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (‘JEDI’ for the purposes of this study) was introduced early during most AORE and SORP focus groups. When asked how they define the term ORP, one participant, acknowledging OR’s historical demographic as being “white and wealthy,” noted a “shift from that mindset” to one that “build[s] a

Table 2
Primary employers for focus group participants.

Society of Outdoor Recreation Professionals	Assoc. of Outdoor Recreation and Education
Colorado Parks & Wildlife	Humboldt State University
Forest Preserves of Cook County	John’s Hopkins University
International Mountain Biking Association	Metropolitan State University of Denver
Middle East Tennessee Tourism Council	Miami University
New York State Office of Parks and Recreation	National Outdoor Leadership School
Superior Hiking Trail Association	Prescott College
Tahoe Regional Planning Agency	Radford University
Tennessee State Parks	Roanoke College
U.S.D.A. Forest Service	University of Mississippi
U.S. Federal Energy Regulatory Commission	University of Texas, Rio Grande Valley
	Virginia Commonwealth University
	West Chester University of Pennsylvania
	West Virginia University
	Westminster College

Note. Two individuals from SORP participated from Tennessee State Parks, and one individual from AORE held a joint appointment at both Prescott College and West Virginia University.

more inclusive environment.” Many participants across all groups noted a need to “redefine” how ORPs are deemed qualified. Labeled by some as “institutional racism,” the standards used in ORP hiring and education were seen as “barriers to access”; the skills, certifications, and work experiences considered representative of a “qualified candidate,” were felt by many to be exclusionary, or at worst, discriminatory standards. The nation’s changing demographics were offered as a two-fold opportunity, both in hiring and participation, to “reframe what criteria we actually need to be facilitators in our outdoor relationship” and redefine who is considered to be “outdoorsy.” Many participants offered challenge to the preconceived notions of who the outdoors is for:

The historically homogenous archetype of who is a recreationalist or who is ‘outdoorsy’ ... I know that’s a word that we’re starting to really challenge and like ‘What does that even mean?’ Like, if you’re going outside, you’re outdoors [then] you’re outdoorsy ... but just thinking about ability, body type, gender identity [...] there’s just so many really incredible stories that are showing folks like ‘Hey, regardless of what you’ve heard there is a space for you.’

That said, as one participant noted, “diversity in the outdoors has been talked about for a while now; We’ve [not] really had much action ... we’ve [not] done a lot, tangibly, to really solve the issue.”

Within the context of social justice efforts, several participants mentioned how recreation is defined and programmed for those living on Federal Indian Reservations, with one remarking how they “noticed a lot more respect to indigenous land practices and incorporating that into programming and land use.” A second participant recalled working with a local tribe in renaming a local trail. The renaming was performed in accordance with tribal traditions. As one focus group member shared, it was “very healing for that community. They felt recognized, seen, and really welcomed in a place that they never left.” Participants also recognized the current social climate as an opportunity to build relationships with communities, embrace new forms of outreach, and think about “culturally relevant pedagogies in understanding how to be culturally relevant as professionals.”

One resource for change mentioned was U.S. Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plans (SCORPs). A participant in the middle of an update to their SCORP mentioned the inclusion of a study on barriers to accessing outdoor recreation and their effort to ensure “everyone is at the table” for recreation and outdoor planning. Another consideration offered for SCORPs was the effective use of Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping technology, accurately representative spatial data, where residents can access open or green spaces within the prescribed 10-min from their homes. Others felt the use of grants to support JEDI-centric initiatives or increased organizational outreach from professional organizations (i.e., AORE, SORP) to groups such as Outdoor Afro or Latino Outdoors are the tools for change.

3.2.2. Social-ecological health

The subject of health was presented by the participants within sociological, physiological, psychological, ecological, and environmental contexts. For the purposes of this study, we categorized impacts to natural resources as *environmental health* and impacts to individuals and society as *human health*. These impacts speak to the participants’ broader conversations on the connectedness between health, the environment and outdoor recreation.

Environmental Health. The environmental impacts of increased visitation, when combined with climate change, create what one participant called “variable and unstable conditions” in which to engage in outdoor recreation. The overarching concerns from all focus groups were the impacts of unpredictable weather and environmental conditions to the planning and preparations required to safely conduct most outdoor activities. The topic of “climate justice” with its ethical and political implications, was raised as preface to discussion of several environmental initiatives, such as those led by Project Trails Respect and Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics, to educate new users and

introduce sustainable practices to every level of the outdoor industry. That said, participants struggled with the perennial question regarding balancing use and preservation:

How do we educate about how important the resources are and how to protect [them]? I, as a recreation [professional] and being a play advocate, think nature play is great, but *where* is nature play great? And, if building forts is not good for the environment, but really great for kids, what’s the balance?

In coordination with federal and state legislative support and national advocacy groups, participants suggested a collection of case, capacity, and feasibility studies from which “scientific thresholds” can be established.

Furthermore, to establish what one participant referred to as the “balance between the outdoor recreation impact and enjoyment” another shared how their organization applies “science-based decision making and infrastructure planning” to uphold air/water quality and vegetation thresholds”:

We’ve done a lot of great work about infrastructure planning. We have corridor plans that are looking at specific segments of the Basin: [What are] the parking management strategies? What are the transit options? What are the bike-in alternative transportation? [...] Mobility options? and things like that.

That said, as noted by multiple participants, with an influx of new outdoor recreationists and pandemic related increases to visitation, the true challenge for maintaining environmental health is “influencing behavior.” Several participants commented on how to message when popular sites are filled to head off resource-damaging behaviors, such as illegal parking and exceeding carrying capacity. An emphasis was placed on finding the most effective medium for “addressing the needs of our new users that don’t understand the rules and regulations” in such a way, as the groups recommend, that “creates and fosters stewardship.”

Human Health. Outdoor recreation’s benefits for physical and mental health were mentioned by several of the groups, with one participant recognizing “incredible increases in anxiety and depression in youth today.” Pandemic restrictions, exacerbating existing or underlying mental health challenges, led one participant to comment there were “more mental health incidents than medical emergencies,” a trend contributing to his decision to gain certification in nature-based counseling. Several participants felt that “our field hasn’t done the best job in documenting the efficacy of nature-based programs on mental health.” Wilderness therapy, outdoor art therapy, and grants that include a health focus were suggested to further link OR’s restorative benefits to overall public health, and yet, as one person noted, “a wilderness therapy program doesn’t qualify for insurance, [which] creates barriers [to building] culturally relevant and responsive programs that benefit us all.”

Additionally, participants shared outdoor recreation planning may serve as a linchpin in developing more interest in active transportation:

The SCORP process is one way to get all the different people that are interested in some facet of outdoor recreation together on the same page talking to each other, [working] together [to] use the resources we have for public health [and] transportation [to more effectively and equitably] provide outdoor recreation.

The pandemic-influenced shift to more local, urban recreation sites was noted as an opportunity to develop a multisectoral “blueprint” between outdoor recreation, transit, and transportation beneficial to both health and the climate.

3.2.3. Societal demand

Most participants mentioned significant increases in public demand for outdoor recreation and outdoor equipment purchases during the pandemic. As one participant commented, the pandemic slowed opportunities for those “who do guide work” yet companies with retail or

rental operations “saw a rise in the amount of people who were utilizing their gear.” As another commented:

[...] anyone who’s tried to buy a mountain bike recently: it’s really hard to do. And I think that speaks to the fact that more people are getting outside, more than ever. It’ll be really interesting to see what the participation trends look like [...] I think it’s a strong case for the benefits of being outside during a really tough time.

The pandemic was widely considered to be a driving force behind increased visitation to local, state, and national parks, with travel restrictions and stay-at-home orders creating a huge increase in the numbers of people outside, “finding opportunities in their own backyard.”

While participants thought these increases strained park management, a participant representing a state park agency felt that the “opportunities to interface with new users” has helped to shift the emphasis from park rangers as “law enforcement” to “enjoy[ing] the opportunity to have conversations and help a family on their first camping trip.” Additionally, participants mentioned seeing a need for more social science data on “influencing behavior” as a tool for visitor use management. Some of the biggest opportunities mentioned by participants were to “look at our visitor use issues, look at resources ... to help educate land managers, users, and partners” capitalize on the surge in visitation. Widely agreed “that people want to be outside” most felt that ORPs have an opportunity of “getting the right messages out to this whole new user base.”

One participant noted how the rise in growth, even before the pandemic, presented “challenges on challenges on challenges [that] sort of feel insurmountable.” One such challenge was the perception of social media’s influence on visitation. Social media was seen by many to be a double-edged sword where information, good or damaging, moves “really quickly.” One participant shared small organizations were especially vulnerable:

... in trying to disperse people, social media has been incredibly positive for us, but it’s also been our worst nightmare. It’s putting literally our trail at risk ... and so, we’re just constantly dealing with that. How do we kind of ride the wind on it [and] figure out, especially as a small nonprofit, how do we quickly pivot? We had a trailhead this summer that typically fits 30 cars and we had 250 cars.

Partnership development and collaboration with government agencies, friends’ groups, advocacy organizations and public utilities was also frequently mentioned as a means to develop, update and disseminate initiatives, as well as respond to trends (i.e., E-Bikes) and overall societal demand:

Partnership development has been huge here in trying to bridge those communication gaps [in order to] figure out the best way to approach outdoor recreation promotion. It’s also opened the door to communication with our statewide advisory committee working on the SCORP right now. What we keep coming back to because of all these issues with partnerships, making sure everybody is working together and collaborating, [is] who should take the lead [among] the stakeholders?

Participants felt that with “all these new users and new ways to [recreate]” it was incumbent on the broader industry, land managers and offices of outdoor recreation included, to “team up” to meet the demand. As one person remarked, while the industry spent “decades trying to convince people the importance of spending time outdoors, it was pretty rewarding to see in a global pandemic [...] people embracing it.”

3.2.4. Industry direction

The influx of new users and overall increase in individuals recreating outdoors led to participant reflections on the direction of the OR industry. Participants stated industry needs included “managers thinking

strategically [to] long-term management solutions [... and] executives wanting to dedicate energy and resources to bettering the outdoor industry.” But some felt that managing growth should not fall exclusively to private sector or federal entities; rather it was observed “a lot of states have [...] developed an office of outdoor recreation” that could be leveraged. As one professional mentioned:

The two biggest assets that I get from being involved with [AORE/SORP] are access to our state directors. And, again, not every state has a state director, but I do think that these sorts of professional associations [serve] as a conduit to be able to connect individual programmers or advocates [...] in a specific state with their state director. I get a lot of my information, or I’m able to leverage different opportunities through those connections.

In turn, participants commented on a desire to see broader collaboration across public, private, and nonprofit sectors of the industry. This was mentioned in reference to presence at conferences and more broadly with participants wanting groups to “really work together” in the development of new recreation sites. As one participant mentioned, “instead of saying we need to build this mountain bike trail [...] how do we holistically look at a space? Not every trail needs to be for every user type.” The development of multi-use spaces will require, as someone mentioned, “a lot more working together to build a case for outdoor recreation and shared spaces.”

For many in the focus groups, the ORP’s development within the industry was hampered by a myriad of issues, primarily the constant lack of funding, impacting not only resource management, planning, and programming, but the ability to attract and maintain a workforce. Collectively, participants felt outdoor recreation suffers from an inability to provide sustainable employment, particularly in high-cost areas where seasonal workers struggle to find affordable housing. To begin to combat this challenge, participants shared professional development the advocacy organizations, such as AORE and SORP, were looked to provide links to employment, a networking interface, and industry-related news to its members. Additionally, several participants looked to their national organizations to act as a medium between “disjointed” training, certification, and education efforts among individual OR entities and “connectivity [as] we all find different solutions ... so that we’re not all recreating the same wheel.”

For the participants who were outdoor educators, one outcome of the pandemic was the shift from the traditional classroom to virtual learning. One participant shared how they incorporated strategies from their campus’ disability service center, such as recorded class sessions, closed captions and transcripts:

The pandemic has brought to the forefront that we all needed to do a lot of work on our classes to get out of [the] rigid framework of how we teach and figure out why are we doing this. What is the rationale behind this particular decision as it pertains to how we teach this class? And, is this the only way? Is this the best way or [is this] a different way?

This focus on innovation was also mirrored by a focus on integration with other sectors of the industry. As one person noted, at their institution:

... areas of commonality among disciplines that might appear to be unrelated to the outdoors, like materials and design classes, [are partnership opportunities]: how different materials can be used to make different equipment or how the engineering department might ... work with us to pull test some things, [like] to break some carabiners, or test knots, or different systems.

In sum, the theme of industry direction largely stemmed from participants’ hope to collaboratively capitalize on current demand, while addressing previous blind spots related to workforce support, community integration and co-management.

3.2.5. Professional identity

The final theme of defining the ‘outdoor recreation profession’ surfaced primarily from AORE participants. For those participants, ORPs were described as “difficult to define” or a “fairly broad topic ... not easily nailed down.” One AORE participant commented on recreation credentials were:

[...] not something we can put on a transcript or it’s not as valid as getting a business degree because ‘recreation’ just means you’re having fun. So, it’s this constant balance of trying to measure the learning that’s happening [while] challenging the systems of play. Why can’t we have leisure time and why isn’t that rewarded? Why aren’t we celebrating the need to take care of ourselves and take care of others in these spaces? I think that’s the real challenge, especially as a professional ... even on my own campus [where] everybody’s like, ‘Oh yeah, you’re just the fun climbing guy.’ And it’s like, ‘No, we offer so much more ... students talking about consent and power and privilege dynamics in our society and systemic oppression.’ But they’re not seeing that.

Other participants struggled with the breadth of the profession: “How do you define [the] outdoor recreation profession [when] there’s 36 million different kinds of outdoor recreation professions. And so, I don’t really have a way of defining it.” Defining the outdoor industry was considered easier for AORE participants than defining the profession. That said, several participants felt even that term was too broad to define, with one suggesting “we think about it as a way of connecting people to nature.” There was consensus among both AORE groups of feeling undervalued, that because the “nature of most of our work is fun, our time can be undervalued.” Disparity in pay, at both entry and within academia was another common response:

We’ve talked about the pay gap and [thinking] about my job and what I am required to do ... [like] most people in higher education, I’m a one man show [running] approximately 80–90 programs by myself. I’m responsible for risk management [...] how many certifications I have to keep up is unreal. And then I look at my, my salary, compared to other people at my university who have numerous professionals working under them my jaw drops [when I take into consideration the amount of] help that they get. We [must] be able to tell our story in the ways that people want to hear ... [with] hard data, the numbers [translate to] money.

That said, for many of these AORE participants, the pandemic helped establish societal value to outdoor spaces and those who provide and facilitate outdoor experiences. Some felt the time was ripe for a public awareness campaign or an exerting of political influence from advocacy organizations to leverage the current focus on the outdoors and land resources into opportunities. The shift to local outdoor recreation was thought to have dual benefit; an introduction of new, more demographically diverse, recreationists and an increasing awareness of what ORPs do. Suggestions to more clearly define the field ranged from narrowing job descriptions within a classification (e.g., outdoor educator, wilderness guide, recreation planner, etc.) to establishing an academic standard similar to other degrees. Noting the inconsistencies in degree standards for an “outdoor degree” one participant commented that “at some institutions [the emphasis] is going to be tourism and nonprofit and [at] another ... leisure and youth services.” Most participants agreed that gaining an “outdoor” degree does not convey the scope of the profession as does a degree in business, marketing or “even photography.”

4. Discussion and implications

This study was conducted to understand the contemporary issues and opportunities for outdoor recreation professionals, as well as their perspectives of training and resource needs to excel in their work. In Spring 2021, sampling the membership from AORE and SORP yielded four

focus groups with a total of 24 organization members, whose reflections were analyzed and aggregated into the five of themes: JEDI, social-ecological health, societal demand, industry direction, and professional identity. We first discuss our findings considering the pandemic, then detail implications from salient issues, opportunities, and resources needs across themes. We conclude with a reflection on our methods and analysis, sharing actionable findings for the outdoor recreation profession.

4.1. COVID-19

We conducted this study during a period of significant social upheaval for outdoor recreation due to the pandemic (e.g., OIA, 2021; Volenc et al., 2021). As mentioned, the coding decision to not treat the pandemic as its own theme, but rather assess how it surfaced *within* themes allowed us to maintain more fidelity to trends that pre-existed but were exacerbated by the pandemic. For example, participants shared social media’s role in increasing visitation, affordable housing and livable wage concerns, surging outdoor recreation demand and the mental health benefits from outdoor recreation for youth were all emergent subthemes or trends prior to the pandemic which each became more evident during the public health crisis. Furthermore, explicit interest in issues, opportunities, and resource needs within each theme allowed us understand differences between national contexts vis a vis pandemic response; unlike Spennemann and Whitsed’s (2021) Australian findings, U.S. ORPs were generally optimistic about the benefits of new users, educational mechanisms, and outdoor recreation purchases during the pandemic. That said, questions surrounding how best to educate new users to reduce environmental and social impacts remained, as well as the broad interest in understanding whether the elevated use resultant from the pandemic would persist.

4.2. Issues

Irrespective of the pandemic, the identification of themes provided insight of the salient issues facing professionals. Striving for a more just, equitable, and diverse industry continues to challenge the outdoor recreation profession. The perennial challenge of diverse representation in the profession and users is identified in past contemporary issues studies (Bobilya et al., 2010), echoed by our participants’ comments and evident in their homogenous racial and ethnic identity. Participants shared this lack of diversity within the profession was thought to require rethinking traditional practices, such as law enforcement (Hicks et al., 2020), to forward goals of inclusivity. Next, environmental impacts from global issues, such as climate change, and local issues, such as increased visitor use from surging visitor demand continued to vex professionals. Similarly, the ongoing mental health crisis in youth, exacerbated by the pandemic, pointed to societal issues requiring greater attention from professionals and agencies. And, while industry growth was largely seen as a positive, responses of AORE participants indicated remaining questions surrounding workforce compensation and program funding, as well as an aversion to the ‘outdoor recreation profession’ as a binding semantic for the field.

4.3. Opportunities

Despite these challenges, one clear message from all focus groups was that outdoor recreation was solidly in the national spotlight. In addition to surging demand, this perception is supported by the bipartisan passage of the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), both of which mark long overdue infusions to the budgets of national parks and state and national transportation departments. The GAOA provides almost \$10 billion dollars for maintenance and improvements for the national parks and \$900 million annually for conservation efforts through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). Additionally, the mandate of LWCF

includes the acquisition of land to become parks and open spaces in underserved rural and urban communities. Increasing access to green and open spaces, as participants commented, is just one step to addressing environmental justice and equity. Related to social justice, many professionals shared the profession could leverage a whole industry concept that includes the reframing of hiring requirements and messaging of benefits to appeal to more diverse groups of new users and future outdoor recreation profession. Collaboration, cooperation, and coordination could also provide mutually beneficial outcomes to groups or organizations with separate, but complementary, missions. Finally, participants regularly mentioned the SCORP process to forward equitable access to outdoor recreation, either through refining processes for data collection and/or funding and planning (Virginia Department of Recreation and Conservation, 2018).

4.4. Resources and training needs

To capitalize on these opportunities and address new and perennial issues, participants mentioned numerous resources and training needs. The societal demand for outdoor recreation resources can be supported by facilitators, such as state offices of outdoor recreation, lobbying for overdue appropriations to address additional key themes mentioned by participants, such as JEDI and social-ecological health. State offices of outdoor recreation were thought to provide a needed and desired liaison between local and national parks and recreation agencies, non-profit advocacy groups, and commercial for profit, outdoor recreation entities. Additionally, in reference to the social-ecological health theme, the Centers for Disease Control's 'One Health' initiative affords a multi-sectoral, transdisciplinary approach linking global health to the collective health of people, animals, and the environment (e.g., Hendricks et al., 2019). Without directly mentioning One Health, the outdoor recreation professionals participating in the study made consistent reference to tenets of the initiative such as local, regional, and national coordination, multi-sectoral partnerships, and a linkage to social, health, and environmental health outcomes. The opportunity to further embrace health promotion campaigns to access funding resources and demonstrate value is ripe for the profession. Finally, continued collaboration with nonprofit organizations (i.e., Leave No Trace Foundation of Outdoor Ethics, Outdoor Afro) was referenced as crucial to addressing issues and seizing opportunities. Perhaps predictably, participants felt the two organizations (SORP and AORE) allowed them access to case studies to address specific issues and networks to advance their goals.

4.5. Limitations

The intentional split of groups by organizational membership was designed to discover overarching themes shared between the supply (i.e., recreation settings; SORP) and demand (i.e., programmers, guides, trip leaders; AORE) side of the ORP. This was mostly realized, however, a noticeable divergence existed in affiliation with the semantics of the profession. Perhaps predictably, participants who were part of the 'Society of Outdoor Recreation Professionals,' were not fazed by the outdoor recreation professional semantic, however, 'Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education' members, conversely, were reticent to identify with the term and abandon their identity as 'educators.' This is curious as many AORE members work in departments of 'campus recreation' and SORP members also hold educational or interpretative roles. Future research could explore if this aversion to the ORP semantic is present within other outdoor education programs or is the result of the higher education cultures in which these individuals worked. It is also possibly a function of the difference in career tenure: AORE participants reported a median of 10 years as ORPs; SORP participants, 20 years. Regardless, pragmatically, this difference in experience and emphasis is good news for each respective organization, as it indicates they are meeting the distinct needs of their members. Conceptually, however, it begs the question of the further understanding the nuances of labor force

within the diverse sub-sectors of the outdoor recreation industry.

While the focus group method was instructive for our research topic, it was not without its limitations. As Stewart and Shamdasani (2015) mention, focus groups feature the possibility of 'anchoring' around specific themes shared by one particularly passionate or influential member and snowballing of topics. To this end, our transcripts suggest that the first topic introduced in response to a question triggered and influenced the responses from other participants. With themes identified by the volume of commentary relative to a particular topic, i.e. the health benefits of outdoor recreation, these effects may have influenced the final list of themes. That said, our methodological approach assumes these types of processes play out not only in focus groups, but also in the affinity groups or board meetings of the two respective organizations. So, while a design using individual interviews might eliminate the influence of individual focus group members on other respondents, our results may actually be more reflective of how the organizations function, set priorities, and privilege certain discourses. In sum, the groundedness and trustworthiness of these findings will be assessed through their utility to the respective organizations and their instructive nature for future efforts within the field.

5. Conclusion

Our 2021 investigation of the contemporary issues, opportunities, and resource needs within the U.S. outdoor recreation profession documents professionals' perceptions of the booming industry in which they work. Record growth and demand for outdoor recreation opportunities, particularly during a public health crisis, is mirrored by the growth and development of the profession, which is doing the work to further center equity and ecological models of health within its practice. Within this maturation of the industry, workforce issues and integration continue to feature as dominant needs that can be facilitated by a host of parties both within and outside of professional organizations. In sum, the future of outdoor recreation is bright, but requires continued investment and innovation to support the stewards of recreation opportunities and balance protection of resources.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Diana L. Harrison: Software, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Caleb Scruggs:** Investigation, Data curation. **Michala L. Hendrick:** Software, Investigation, Data curation. **Jessica K. Caraway:** Investigation, Data curation. **Bryant Morales:** Investigation, Data curation. **Jasmine M. Jones:** Investigation, Data curation. **Brendan J. Kane:** Investigation, Data curation. **Iris P. Perkins:** Investigation, Data curation. **Chris A.B. Zajchowski:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jort.2022.100560>.

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