

Where Should the Trail(s) Go?

This activity addresses the following essential understandings:

- The vast public lands of the U.S. provide a unique opportunity to conserve and restore native plant communities.
- There are tradeoffs among the many beneficial uses for public lands.

Overview

This activity encourages students to grapple with the tradeoffs that public land managers face as they balance native plant preservation with land uses such as recreation and tourism. The choice in the activity is whether to approve hiking trails on a parcel of land and, if so, which of two routes to select. Small groups of students analyze how various options may affect heritage areas, the tourism economy, hikers, and native plants.



Time Estimate:

45 minutes

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to (1) describe factors considered by planners when making public land use decisions; (2) take and defend positions on hypothetical but realistic land use planning questions; and (3) explain the costs and benefits of land use choices.

Preparation

1. Make copies of the three-page handout and Camina Vista map (one per student).
2. Read the “Background Information” to become familiar with some of the choices that public land managers face and the diverse views about what the managers should do.

Background Information

BLM public lands are managed for diverse uses such as supplying natural resources—minerals, timber, coal, natural gas, oil, renewable energy—and providing habitat for plants

and animals. BLM public lands also provide open spaces where people can enjoy recreation and learn about evidence of our country’s past, from ancient trilobites to 20th century ghost towns.

Public land managers must balance recreation, conservation, and economic values when deciding a land use question, and they listen to diverse voices representing a wide range of interests. People who depend on the hospitality industry want high levels of tourism activity and often favor decisions that promote recreation. Outdoor enthusiasts who enjoy hiking in scenic areas, rock climbing, fishing, and mountain biking also usually want to see decisions that accommodate recreation. Alternatively, tribal leaders, historic preservationists, and conservationists often speak for minimizing human impact on the land, even if that means limiting recreational opportunities. This view may be seconded by those in farming and agriculture, who often depend on healthy plant communities to filter water and to support grazing animals and pollinators of food crops. Land use managers constantly explore ways to preserve

biodiversity, maintain balanced habitats, attract visitors to the public lands, promote economic activity, and ensure that future generations can enjoy cultural and recreational resources.

Camina Vista is the fictional parcel of land at the heart of this activity, but the issues and perspectives are representative of those often faced by public land managers. Camina Vista is bisected by a paved road, includes a heritage site regarded as sacred by the local tribal nation, is currently without formal recreational opportunities, and is largely covered by native sagebrush that faces various threats, including the invasive plant cheatgrass.

It is essential for students to understand that there is not just one right answer for the dilemma in the activity. The students should appreciate the tradeoffs that land managers face when weighing the pros and cons of choices that may partially satisfy most stakeholders but are certain not to fully satisfy everyone.

Procedure

1. **Hook:** Ask students to think about decisions made by young people that have long-lasting effects versus ones that do not. Ask for a show of hands for which of the following choices have long-term consequences: whether to go to a movie or stay in, whether to stay in school or drop out, whether to have pizza or salad, whether to take college preparation courses or not. Note that public officials like mayors and presidents are often called upon to make long-lasting decisions, such as whether to open a new school or send the military overseas. These are decisions about which many smart and sincere people may disagree, often making them difficult to resolve.
2. **Intro:** Explain that public land managers make long-lasting decisions just as mayors and presidents do. Public land managers must consider the diverse views of many smart and sincere people before making decisions that can have consequences lasting decades or even centuries. Let students know they will get into small groups to look at and make choices about a land use issue just as public land managers would, considering various views and being aware that there is not just one right answer.
3. **Group instructions:** Distribute the student handout to everyone; ask them to read the scenario and examine the map; and explain that their job in the group is to choose an option by consensus. Divide students into groups of four or five, and ask the groups to select someone to report out. Provide about 20 minutes for the groups to consider the arguments and select one of the options, which include: do nothing, approve the short trail, approve the long trail, or approve both trails. Answer any clarification questions students may have and emphasize that there is not just one right answer.
4. **Report out:** Ask the reporter from each group to report the decisions their group reached. Keep a tally to show which groups made which choices. Ask reporters to identify which arguments were most persuasive and why, as well as how difficult the decision was to make. If any groups did not reach consensus, ask them why they were unable. For those groups that did reach consensus, ask why they rejected the choices they did not select, as well as why they made the choice they made.

5. **Conclusion:** Reconfigure the class into one unit. Ask for a show of hands for which students thought which factor was the most important: promoting economic development, protecting native plants, accommodating recreation, preserving native heritage. Ask students to comment on which tradeoff was most difficult, and ask if anyone changed his or her view from the beginning to the end of the activity and, if so, why.

Progress Check

Circulate among groups as students discuss the land use issue, and listen for whether students are on topic and respectfully discussing the tradeoffs. Use student responses to the question in step 5 (conclusion) to gauge how well they understand the tradeoffs facing land managers.

Extensions to Consider

Instead of providing students with many of the pros and cons, ask them to come up with these by discussing in groups how each land use choice would affect native plants, hikers and other recreation interests, ecosystem balance, the local tourism economy, and the tribal nation. Then ask students to work together to make a consensus decision.

Another alternative is to assign students the various roles, such as hikers, tourism promoters, tribal leaders, and conservationists. Group students by role, and ask them to develop a presentation and argue their positions in front of a panel of volunteer adults or neutral peers. Ask the panel to decide the trail siting question.

Describe a similar dilemma you have faced as a land manager, and explain how you heard from and balanced diverse viewpoints.

Tradeoffs and Land Use Decisions

Instructions:

- Read the scenario, things to consider, and pros and cons of each option. Look at the map, and examine the two possible routes for hiking trails in Camina Vista, a fictional area of public land.
- Your group needs to agree on a decision about the trails, and your choices include: (1) do not approve either trail; (2) approve Trail 1, the shorter trail; (3) approve Trail 2, the longer trail; and (4) approve both trails.
- Select a reporter for the group who will explain your group's choice to the rest of the class, including: (1) your decision, (2) the main reasons you made that choice, (3) how difficult it was to decide, and (4) the key tradeoffs you discussed.

Scenario

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is the federal agency that manages the Camina Vista public lands (see the Camina Vista map). The BLM is considering adding one or more hiking trails there. Camina Vista is home to a Native American heritage site, a sagebrush community, a bighorn sheep area, some invasive cheatgrass, a scenic vista, and a wetland. The sagebrush is threatened by cheatgrass and more frequent wildfires. Camina Vista is next to Walker Mesa, an established recreation area with trails that are part of a regional trail system. The area also has a north-south road going through it.

The BLM Camina Vista land managers have four options:

1. Do nothing, and leave the area as it is.
2. Authorize a shorter loop trail (Trail 1 on the map).
3. Approve a longer trail with a connector trail to Walker Mesa's system of trails covering hundreds of miles (Trail 2 on the map).
4. Approve both Trail 1 and Trail 2.

Things to consider:

- If either trail is built, a parking area, a visitor kiosk, and a restroom facility will have to be added.
- Trail 1 would lead visitors to a fishing area, but hikers would walk through cheatgrass and possibly spread its seeds into sagebrush areas.
- Trail 2 includes a rigorous rock scramble, a scenic overlook, a bighorn sheep area, and a connector trail to a larger trail system called Walker Mesa. Like Trail 1, Trail 2 leads hikers through cheatgrass, the seeds of which may be spread by hikers to sagebrush areas.

Pros and cons of each option

Approve Neither Trail

Pros:

- This choice would have the least impact on the sagebrush and the bighorn sheep in the ecosystem.

- This choice would ensure no one visits the heritage area, which is considered sacred ground by the tribal nation.
- If the cheatgrass threatening the sagebrush community can soon be brought under better control, Trail 1 could be approved in the future, but approving the trail now could heighten the risks of expanding the range of the cheatgrass.

Cons:

- Local businesses would miss out on money that hikers would have spent on food and lodging in the area.
- This choice would not allow users of the larger trail system in Walker Mesa to experience hiking in Camina Vista, nor would anyone make use of the fishing lake.
- Fewer visitors to public lands may result in fewer supporters of public lands.

Approve Trail 1 Only

Pros:

- Trail 1 would have less impact than Trail 2 on the sagebrush and the bighorn sheep in the ecosystem.
- Trail 1 would bring some additional visitors to the public lands, which may lead to some of them becoming supporters of public lands.
- Trail 1 would provide hikers with access to the fishing lake.
- Trail 1 would protect the heritage area, which is considered sacred ground by the tribal nation, from nearly all visitors.

Cons:

- Trail 1 would attract too few visitors to support new restaurants, campgrounds, hotels, and other businesses.
- Trail 1 would not connect to the trail system in Walker Mesa, so users of that larger system would not be able to experience hiking in Camina Vista, and Camina Vista hikers could not reach Walker Mesa.
- Because hikers have to go through cheatgrass to get to the lake, they could spread seeds, which could cause the cheatgrass to take over the nearby sagebrush.
- Hikers would not experience the scenic vista and the rock scramble on Trail 2.

Approve Trail 2 Only

Pros:

- With the scenic view and rock scramble, Trail 2 would likely attract enough new visitors to support new restaurants, campgrounds, hotels, and other businesses.
- Trail 2 would connect to the trail system in Walker Mesa, so users of that larger system would be able to experience hiking in Camina Vista, and hikers in Camina Vista could reach Walker Mesa.
- Trail 2 would likely increase the number of public lands supporters because they have visited and enjoyed the land.

Cons:

- Trail 2 would have more negative impacts on the sagebrush, allowing more cheatgrass to take hold in the area as hikers accidentally spread cheatgrass seeds and deposit them in sagebrush.
- Threats to the sagebrush would upset ecosystem balance by threatening other species that rely on the sagebrush.
- Trail 2 would bring hikers near the bighorn sheep and right next to—and possibly tempt hikers to enter—the Native American heritage area, which is considered sacred ground by the tribal nation.
- Trail 2 would not allow hikers to use the fishing lake along Trail 1.

Approve Both Trails

Pros:

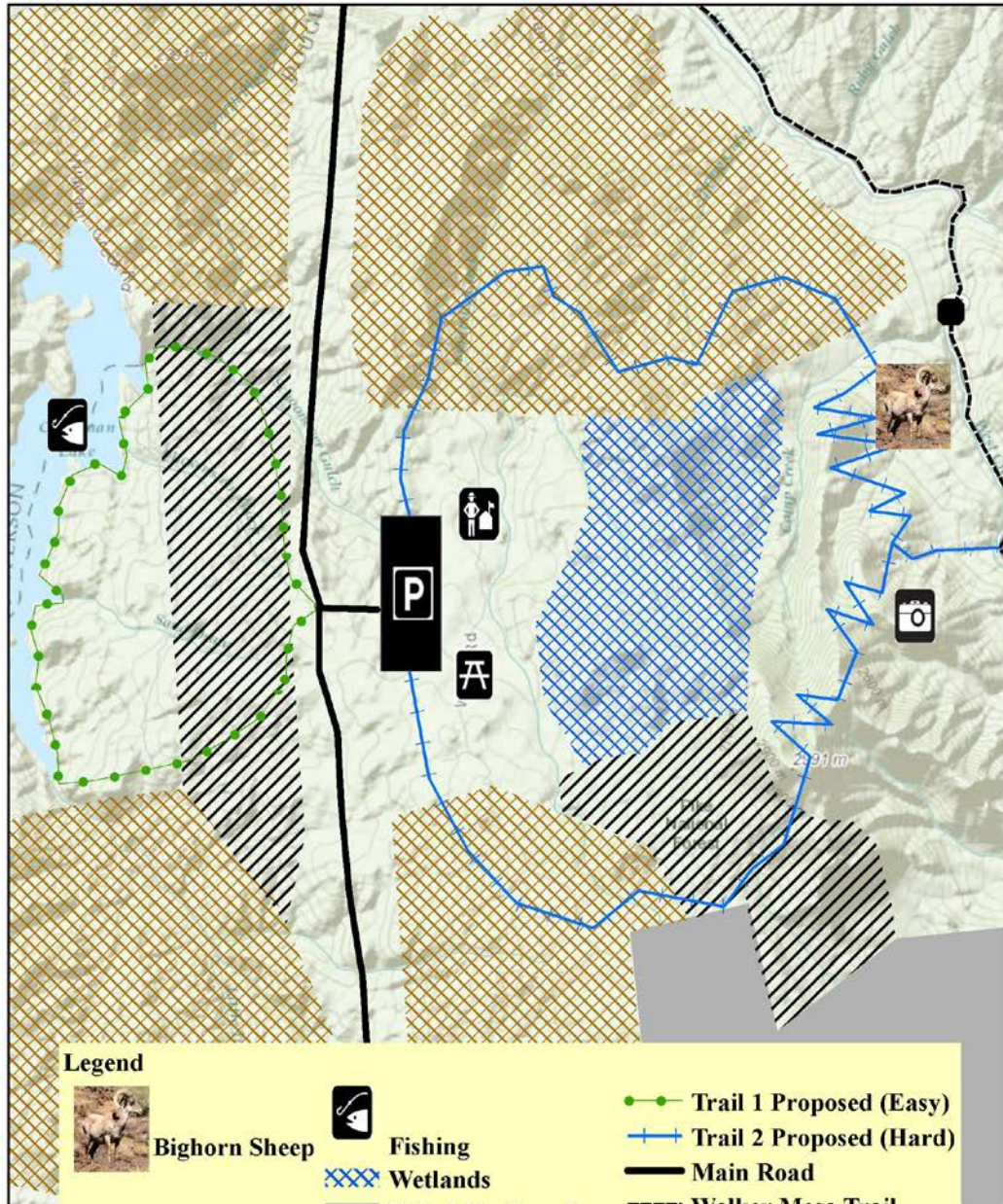
- This choice would provide visitors with more trail choices to accommodate hikers with various levels of hiking ability, hikers interested in fishing, and those who want to see the scenic view and rock scramble.
- This choice would attract enough new visitors to support new restaurants, campgrounds, hotels, and other businesses.
- This choice would connect Trail 2 to the trail system in Walker Mesa, so users of that larger system would be able to experience hiking in Camina Vista, and hikers in Camina Vista could reach Walker Mesa.
- This choice would likely increase the number of public lands supporters because they have visited and enjoyed the land.

Cons:

- Because both trails would go through cheatgrass, hikers could accidentally spread its seeds, which could cause cheatgrass to take over nearby sagebrush.
- Threats to the sagebrush would upset ecosystem balance by threatening other species that rely on the sagebrush.
- This choice would bring hikers near the bighorn sheep and right next to—and possibly tempt hikers to enter—the Native American heritage area, which is considered sacred ground by the tribal nation.



Camina Vista



Legend

Bighorn Sheep	Fishing	Trail 1 Proposed (Easy)
Wetlands	Tribal Heritage Area	Trail 2 Proposed (Hard)
Lunch Area	Sage Brush	Main Road
Good View	Cheatgrass	Walker Mesa Trail
	Parking	
	Ranger Station	

