

Outdoor Recreation Opportunities in the Minnesota River Valley: Summary of Feedback

1/10/2024

This document summarizes public input on outdoor recreation suggestions for the Upper Minnesota River Valley. It also identifies a set of potential investments that could be advanced by DNR and local communities in the near future. The purpose of the public engagement process was to identify opportunities for new and/or enhanced outdoor recreation as part of the transfer of Upper Sioux Agency State Park lands to the Upper Sioux Community (Pezihutazizi). The engagement process:

- Explored how people use Upper Sioux Agency State Park,
- Identified other important outdoor recreation opportunities in the area,
- Shared information about state and federal funding (e.g., Land and Water Conservation Fund),
- Generated ideas for creating new and/or enhancing existing outdoor recreation, and
- Developed considerations for prioritizing outdoor recreation investments.

Engagement Context

The DNR sought feedback on ideas for creating new and/or enhancing existing outdoor recreation opportunities in the Upper Minnesota River Valley. In 2023, the Minnesota Legislature directed the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to convey all state lands within Upper Sioux Agency State Park to the Upper Sioux Community. The DNR is committed to investing in outdoor recreation as part of the land transfer process. The legislation, directing the DNR to convey lands, served as the starting point for the engagement process.

The DNR also consulted with the Upper Sioux Community in advance of the public engagement process and shared information during the process. Tribal leaders also attended several of the public engagement meetings.

People were able to engage in this process through the summer and fall of 2023. The DNR collected feedback at two meetings held on June 29th, as well online comments through Engage with DNR. People contributed a total of 159 comments through September 2023, with 29 comment forms from the meetings on June 29th and 130 comments submitted online. Meeting participants completed a mapping activity to identify other outdoor recreation areas and possible investment opportunities. People were also able to share ideas directly with DNR staff at meetings, over the phone, and through email. Discussion at a public working session and open house meeting on August 30th, and stakeholder meetings generated further detail about these opportunities. The DNR held a public working session on November 8th to discuss values and considerations for investments in the area.

The following information summarizes themes from these comments and discussions. People submitted many specific ideas and comments; those specifics, while helpful for the DNR and next steps, are not all included in

this summary report. The DNR began to hear some of the same suggestions repeated and through multiple sources, indicating the range of investment ideas were approaching the saturation point.

Respondent Characteristics

The vast majority of commenters, over 90%, have visited Upper Sioux Agency State Park. About one-third of respondents visited the park within the previous month, 30% visited within the past year, and another 30% visited the park more than a year ago.

Commenters from a variety of locations provided feedback. Roughly equal shares of people who commented reside in the local area, region, or outside of the region. Commenters were most likely to be white and a larger share of feedback was provided by women than men.

The following tables have additional details on the characteristics of people who commented. Note that demographic questions were optional and it was possible for one person to submit more than one comment.

Most Recent Upper Sioux Agency State Park Visit

Most Recent Visit	Percent
Within the past week	17%
Within the past month	15%
Within the past year	30%
More than one year ago	29%
I have never visited USASP	9%

Miles from Residence to Upper Sioux Agency State Park

Distance from Upper Sioux Agency State Park	Percent
10 miles or less	23%
11-50 miles	29%
51-100 miles	25%
101 miles or more	23%

Respondent Race / Ethnicity

Race / Ethnicity	Percent
White	95%
American Indian or Alaska Native	3%
Hispanic or Latino	1%
Asian or Asian American	0%
Black or African American	0%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0%
Prefer to self-identify (please specify)	5%

**People may select multiple racial/ethnic identities. This table excludes those who preferred not to answer.*

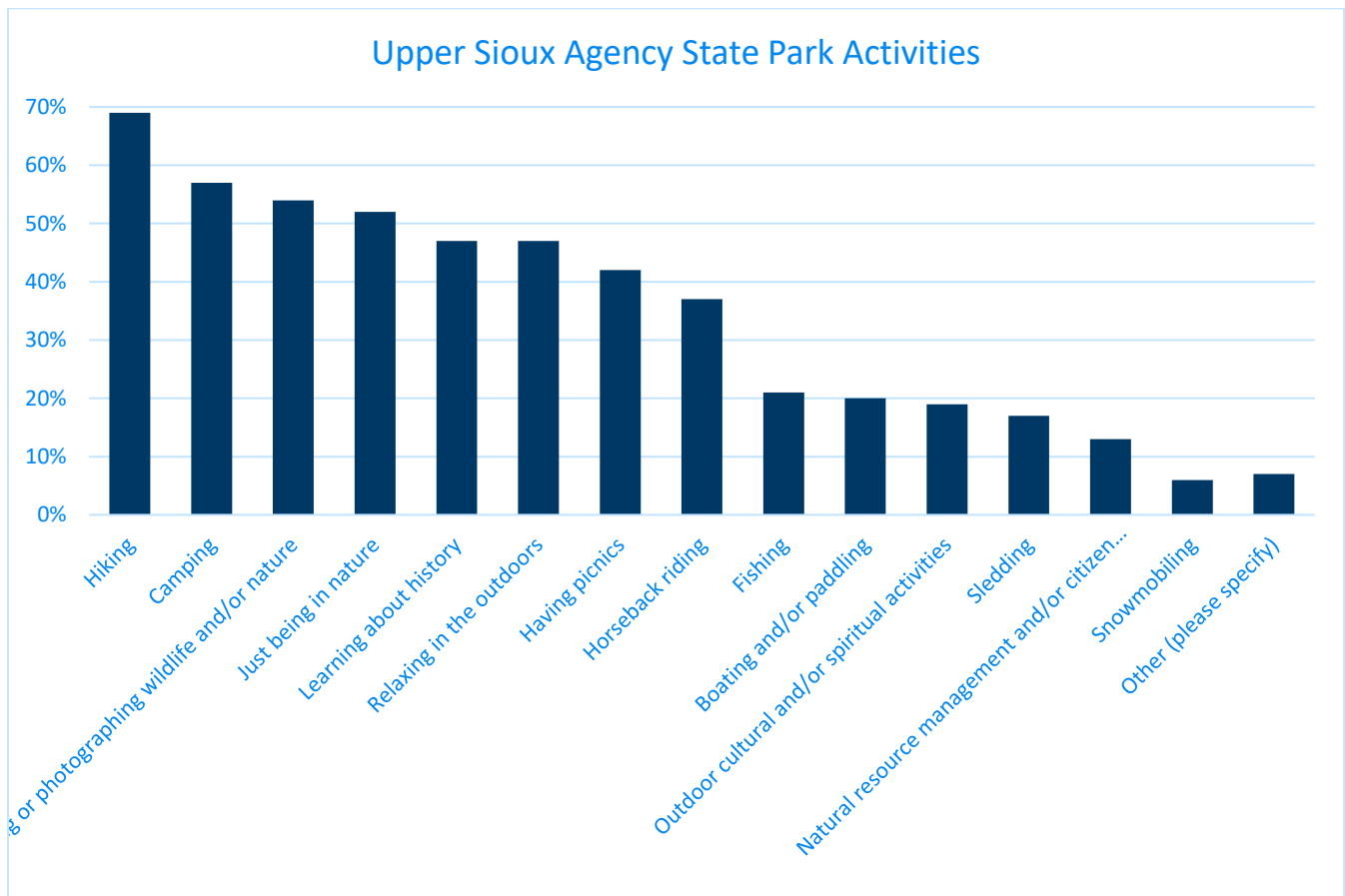
Respondent Gender

Gender	Percent
Female	66%
Male	34%
Non-binary	0%
Prefer to self-identify (please specify)	1%

* This table excludes those who preferred not to answer.

Outdoor Activities

Commenters reported participating in similar activities at Upper Sioux Agency State Park as people engage in at Minnesota state parks in general. Hiking, camping, viewing or photographing wildlife and/or nature, and just being in nature, were the top four activities people participated in during past visits to the park. Over half of commenters have camped at the park at some point in the past.



*Complete response labels: Viewing or photographing wildlife and/or nature, and Natural resource management and/or citizen science

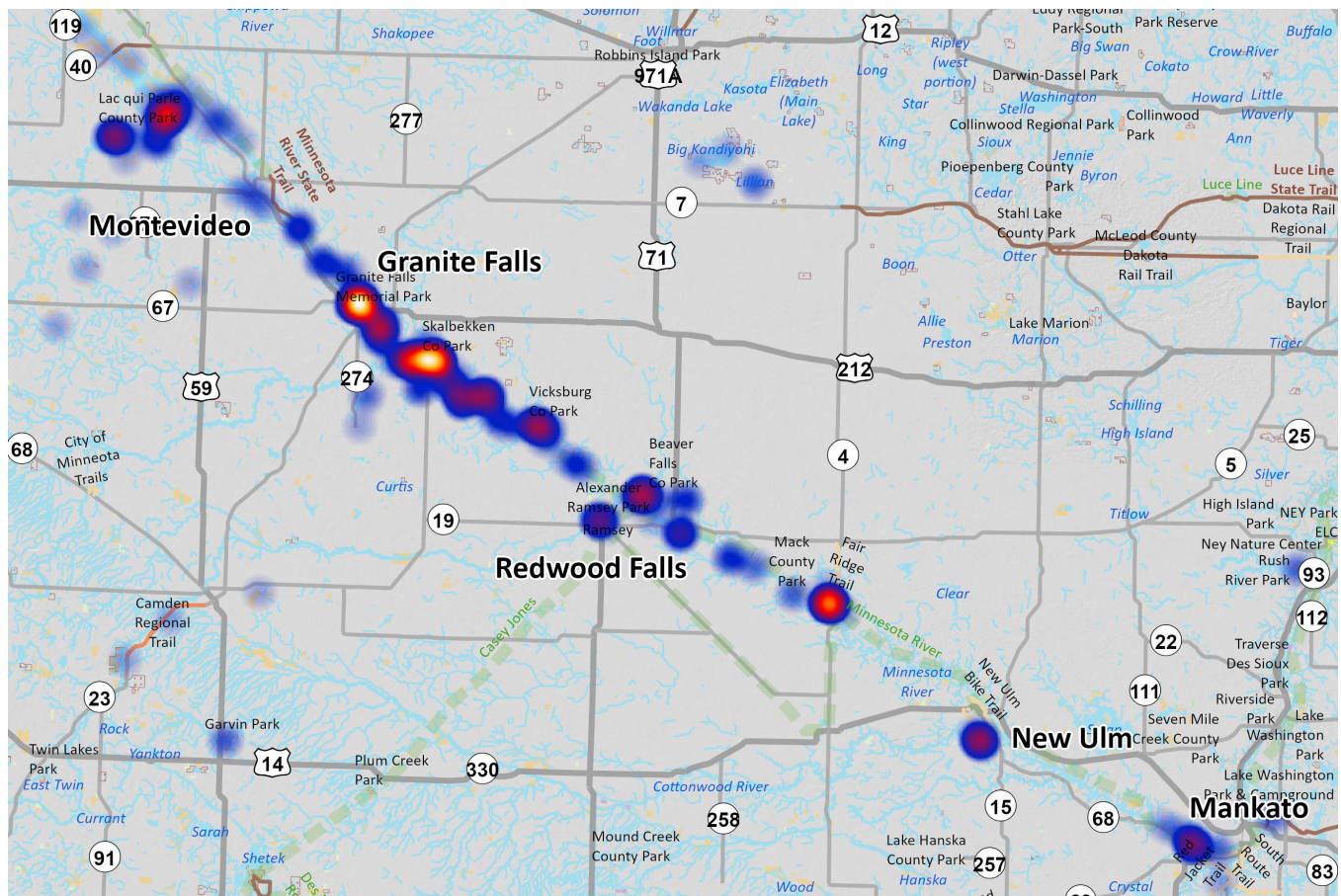
Heat Map of Area Outdoor Recreation

This map is a summary of outdoor recreation areas throughout the region that people visit and are interested in. Locations were collected through a mapping activity and comment forms during meetings on June 29th. The map also includes locations people mentioned in online feedback submitted through Engage with DNR.

The scope for the map includes the areas covered by the in-person mapping activity. Some places were not able to be placed on the map because they were located outside of this geographic area. Some generalized comments, such as “county parks,” were not able to be included because they did not reference a specific place.

The map clearly illustrates the importance and value of providing replacement opportunities in the local area and within the Minnesota River Valley. Places mentioned more often show up on the map in brighter orange and yellow colors. Many people commented that any investments in outdoor recreation should be made in the “local area.” The results of this mapping activity define the “local area” as the area within the Minnesota River Valley (between the bluffs), and located along Chippewa, Yellow Medicine, Renville and Redwood counties from Lac qui Parle State Park to Fort Ridgely State Park. Some people mentioned lands in the prairie or further downstream on the Minnesota River.

Heat Map of Area Outdoor Recreation



Varied Opinions on this Process

The DNR understands people have a wide variety of opinions about transferring lands at Upper Sioux Agency State Park to the Upper Sioux Community. The DNR acknowledged that this public engagement process would begin with the legislative direction to transfer the lands. The feedback clearly shows this is an important issue to people and to the community. People expressed a range of support and opposition to the land transfer, as well as support and opposition to the DNR's process. Comments also requested transparency and authentic engagement with the local public, local governments, stakeholder groups, and the Upper Sioux Community.

Ideas for New and/or Enhanced Outdoor Recreation Opportunities

Park amenities and opportunities

Camping and lodging: The feedback supported additional overnight accommodations to attract people to the area by providing a variety of camping and lodging types. Some commented on the importance of specific camping amenities such as spacing between sites and electric/water hookups.

Day-use opportunities: People suggested potential ways to enhance day-use park amenities. These included improving access to existing public lands, modernizing facilities such as restrooms, and developing new recreation use areas. Some suggested specific amenities to cater to families with children and aging park users (e.g., playgrounds, family gathering spaces, sledding hills, and accessible trails).

Upgrades and enhancements to existing facilities: Some feedback valued maintaining and enhancing existing opportunities in the area over creating new opportunities. These individuals prioritized taking care of current parks and trails, rather than expanding them. Improving the quality of opportunities could better serve existing users while attracting additional visitors.

Trails within parks: Many comments expressed interest in enhanced trail opportunities including single-use and multi-use trails. Comments focused on trails providing access to the river valley landscapes and natural areas. Most comments referenced hiking, equestrian and bicycle trails, with several comments about cross-country ski, snowmobile or off-highway vehicle opportunities. Several comments emphasized accessibility and noted many existing trails are too long and challenging for some user groups.

Equestrian opportunities: A number of people suggested creating an equestrian hub with overnight use and a variety of trail experiences somewhere in the area. This included ideas for adding an equestrian hub to an existing park in the area, expanding equestrian amenities already present at an area park, or acquiring and creating a new horse-riding destination.

Water recreation and access

Survey responses indicated surface water resources in the area are valued for a variety of reasons, including, but not limited to, river and shore fishing, paddling and boating, and public water access to accommodate activities such as walking/hiking trails and camping near water features. Several respondents suggested developing a whitewater kayaking park through Granite Falls. Overall, people would like to see improved access to the river

and water resources, generally allowing people to be near the water. Comments suggested investments in creating new public access as well as improving maintenance and facilities at existing access sites.

Trail connections

Hiking and walking: Many people supported hiking and walking trail opportunities. Many of the comments for hiking and walking also mentioned access to the river and landscapes around the river. Some of these comments were related to providing access to experience nature. A few comments expressed the need for accessible trails that allow people to experience these resources. Several people suggested long-distance hiking trail opportunities along the Minnesota River.

Bicycling: Comments included a variety of suggestions for cycling opportunities in the area. Some of these expressed general support for bicycle trails, while others mentioned specific opportunities such as completing the trail connection from Montevideo to Granite Falls or creating a mountain bike trail center in the area.

Equestrian: Many comments expressed support for new and enhanced equestrian opportunities. People commented on the unique aspects of riding opportunities currently provided at Upper Sioux Agency State Park, including the size of the trail networks, variety of trail characteristics for different riders, and the landscape surrounding the trails. Suggestions included providing new riding opportunities, either at newly acquired public lands or by adding horse trails at existing public lands. Many comments suggested enhancements at existing riding areas such as better trail maintenance, increased trail mileage, and additional amenities including water, electricity, campsites and tie lines.

Winter trails: Some people commented on winter trail opportunities such as maintaining the snowmobile trail network and providing cross-country ski opportunities.

Public lands and conservation

Acquire new public lands: Many comments expressed support for providing access to bluffs and natural lands along the river, similar to the features currently protected at Upper Sioux Agency State Park. These suggestions valued access to a large land-base for nature experiences, access to the river, and access to bluff and river landscapes. People suggested, ideally, a new state park would be established in the area. However, participants also acknowledged the difficulty of finding and creating this opportunity because of land ownership patterns in the region. While some comments supported establishing a new state park, others focused on the opportunities provided by new lands without expressing a preference for the type of land designation.

Expand existing parks and protected areas: Many people provided feedback on opportunities to expand the land base of existing parks and protected areas. These comments noted the importance of these existing areas and opportunities to expand resources in areas that already allow access. Comments mentioned acquiring land for city parks, county parks, state parks, wildlife management areas, and scientific and natural areas. The specific units people mentioned most often, related to land acquisition, were Memorial Park, Skalbekken Park, Timm Park, and Wegdahl Park.

Habitat and natural resource management: While most comments focused on land acquisition, some prioritized resource management and restoration, rather than land acquisition. Suggestions included prairie restoration,

additional prescribed fire and natural resource management, and habitat restoration for wildlife, including game species.

History and interpretation

Some of the feedback focused on the importance of Upper Sioux Agency State Park and the Upper Sioux Agency Historic Sites for Indigenous and Minnesota history. Comments emphasized the need to continue to tell the important stories of this place, including the U.S. Dakota War of 1862. Some questioned how these stories could be effectively told without public access to these specific locations, while others identified opportunities to invest in interpretation at existing sites with public access (e.g. Wood Lake Battlefield). Some supported investments in programs, services and signs to tell these stories, which could occur in a variety of locations. People valued opportunities for schools and children to make sure the next generations understand this history. Some also acknowledged the importance of the Upper Sioux Community's role in telling these stories. There was also acknowledgment of the Minnesota Historical Society's (MHS) role in this work.

Values for Investment Outcomes

Community engagement: People suggested the DNR work with a range of groups and organizations going forward, including the City of Granite Falls; Chippewa, Renville, Redwood and Yellow Medicine counties; the Upper Minnesota Valley Regional Development Commission; and the local trail clubs, among others. People also suggested or wondered if there were future opportunities to work with the Upper Sioux Community on outdoor recreation opportunities in the region.

Range of outdoor recreation values: Respondents expressed interest in a range of types of recreational activities. Some supported amenities to support active uses, such as hiking and bicycling, while others expressed support for simply providing access for people to experience natural landscapes and settings.

Recognizing history: Several comments focused on the importance of Upper Sioux Agency State Park and the Upper Sioux Agency Historic Site for Indigenous and Minnesota history. Comments emphasized the need to continue to tell the significant stories of this place, including the U.S. Dakota War of 1862. Some questioned how these stories could be effectively told without public access to the park and its resources. Others mentioned new possibilities for telling stories and considering opportunities to foster healing across cultures (e.g. art project, traveling exhibit, monument, and programs through local schools or libraries).

Local opportunities: Some comments expressed a preference for investments in local opportunities to be managed by local governments and organizations. A few of these comments noted their distrust of the DNR and a lack of a commitment to maintain facilities at some outdoor recreation areas. Some also expressed a preference to avoid re-assigning the Land and Water Conservation Fund federal designation onto nearby public lands.

Creating a regional or statewide attraction: People expressed the importance and value of having a statewide attraction in the area, as it draws in visitors and supports the local economy. Some comments requested the creation of a new state park, either by acquiring new lands, or expanding/re-designating another public land base as a state park. The feedback included some creative ideas for types of opportunities, other than a state park, that could serve as a regional or statewide attraction.

Investment Considerations

People suggested a wide range of ideas and possible investments for creating and/or enhancing outdoor recreation options for many user groups. This demonstrates the variety of people who participated in the process and the scope of opportunities in the area. Ideas included suggestions related to camping, trails, water recreation, equestrian amenities and interpretation. People suggested, ideally, a new state park would be established in the area with similar resources and amenities as Upper Sioux Agency State Park. However, participants also acknowledged the difficulty of finding and creating this opportunity because of land ownership patterns in the region.

Participants also felt the funding provided along with the legislation to transfer the lands was not sufficient to recreate a new park with a land base, visitor amenities, and recreational experiences similar to those provided at Upper Sioux Agency State Park.

Given the large volume of ideas there is a need to prioritize opportunities in order to develop feasible investments. The DNR discussed investment criteria at the final public working session and in stakeholder meetings. The following themes capture the sentiment of many people who participated and are helpful when considering specific investment possibilities.

- Importance for new investments to generate tourism and support economic activity.
- Emphasis on investments that will have an immediate impact on the area (while also pursuing long-term actions).
- Provide a range of outdoor recreation activities and amenities for a variety of recreational user groups.
- Value for indigenous and Minnesota history and interest in continuing to tell the important stories of the region.

Potential Investments

People have provided many great ideas for how to expand and improve outdoor recreation opportunities in the area. Ideas and proposals have come from members of the local community, local government officials, park visitors, DNR staff, and interested park and conservation-focused organizations. The DNR intends to invest the majority of the appropriated funding on outdoor recreation opportunities in the area based on the engagement process. The ideas and proposals gathered are being evaluated by DNR with input from partners.

The DNR welcomes input to ensure investments have the most impact in the region. Send any comments or questions about potential investments to Darin Newman, parks and trails planner, darin.newman@state.mn.us.