

FELLOWSHIP BRIEF

Outdoor Recreation Industry Discourse and Values: Implications for Public Lands

Mara MacDonell, MEdSc '23

The Need.

In recent fights to protect places such as Bristol Bay, the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, and Bears Ears National Monument from proposed extraction, the outdoor recreation industry has been a vocal and generous conservation advocate. However, the role of the outdoor recreation industry in public lands and environmental protection is complicated—especially in rural communities. The outdoor recreation industry in the United States is an estimated 689 billion-dollar industry built on myths of manifest destiny and privilege—and currently positioned as an economic panacea for former extraction communities across the West. As the outdoor recreation boom facilitates rapid growth in rural communities in the West, more questions arise. What does rapid growth mean for the rural communities the recreation economy plans to save? What does this mean for the public lands adjacent? Who will benefit? Who will lose? And who drives these conversations?

The Project.

Mara used qualitative research methods—structured interviews and participant observation—as well as secondary source and discourse analysis to help answer the following questions:

- How do the values and discourse associated with the outdoor recreation industry drive cultural discourses, perceptions, and management of public lands and the environment?
- How does this manifest in rural communities, especially those economically dependent on this growing industry?
- How do differences arise based on a person's experience interacting with the environment based on labor, livelihood, work, or play?



Mara approached this issue from two angles. Her research examined outdoor recreation at the industry level, interviewing industry insiders—including professional athletes, outdoor recreation policy makers, and product manufactures—to further understand the interplay between business and the environment. Her research at the community level occurred mainly in Durango, Colorado, and nearby rural communities, where she conducted interviews and observed communities at various stages of economic and environmental transition. Mara also worked in the outdoor recreation industry as a raft guide, to see firsthand how outdoor recreation tourism drives local economies and the interplay between locals, visitors, and seasonal workers.

The Findings.

Mara conducted over 30 interviews with participants ranging from outdoor recreation industry insiders and professional athletes to county and town officials, seasonal recreational employees, and environmental educators. She also partook in over 100 hours of participant observation. This qualitative data augments secondary source and discourse analysis. The full findings from this research will be shared in her Master's thesis in spring 2023. However, thus far, Mara believes that topics including family, belonging, personal well-being, privilege, power, and American identity will come to the forefront.

The Impact.

The questions asked in this research are big and answers often elusive and incomplete. However, this research can help inform and continue conversations regarding human interactions with their landscapes and their unintended consequences. Mara hopes her research can push the outdoor recreation industry to better consider its effects—positive and negative—on rural communities, as well as interrogate the ways in which personal relationships with nature are developed. Mara will use the findings of her summer research to inform her Master's thesis. She also intends to explore creative modalities for sharing research to broader audiences.



The Student.

Mara MacDonell, Research Assistant and Western Resource Fellow | Mara MacDonell is a Masters of Environmental Science student interested in rural communities, science communication, transitioning economies, and environmental justice in the American West. While she grew up in rural, remote northern Minnesota, she fell in love with the West while working in social services policy and programming in Telluride, CO. She has also coached Nordic skiing, served as an AmeriCorps VISTA, and guided backcountry canoe and backpacking trips. She holds a BA in geology from Carleton College. In her free time, Mara enjoys backcountry skiing, running rivers, rock climbing, and painting.