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Outdoor Recreation as a Community Development Strategy in Rural British Columbia: Bridges and Barriers to Success

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Abstract

Within a fast-changing global landscape, rural places are seeking sustainable pathways to community development. Intentional growth of the outdoor recreation sector offers a host of potential benefits, including economic diversification, resident retention and attraction, and improvements to public health. To fully realize these benefits, however, communities need to be intentional in their development approach and manage common challenges and barriers to success like conflict, team burnout, environmental degradation, and a failure to capture visitor spending. The Outdoor Recreation Council of British Columbia commissioned an evidence-based guidebook to help rural communities develop sustainable outdoor recreation economies. This article summarizes lessons learned through the research that informed the guidebook and suggests strategies to capitalize on the community development opportunities presented by outdoor recreation. In addition to relevance outside the case-study province of British Columbia, findings have crossover relevance to other topics in rural and community development.

Keywords: rural, community development, economic development, outdoor recreation, tourism, sustainability

Les loisirs de plein air comme stratégie de développement communautaire en Colombie- Britannique rurale : leviers et obstacles à la réussite

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Résumé

Dans un contexte mondial en constante évolution, les régions rurales recherchent des voies durables de développement communautaire. Le développement ciblé du secteur des loisirs de plein air offre de nombreux avantages potentiels, notamment la diversification économique, la fidélisation et l'attraction de résidents, ainsi que l'amélioration de la santé publique. Toutefois, pour tirer pleinement parti de ces avantages, les collectivités doivent adopter une approche de développement ciblée et surmonter les défis et obstacles courants entravant la réussite, tels que les conflits, l'épuisement professionnel des équipes, la dégradation de l'environnement et l'incapacité à capter les dépenses liées au tourisme. Le Conseil des loisirs de plein air de la Colombie-Britannique a commandé un guide pratique fondé sur des données probantes afin d'aider les collectivités rurales à développer des économies durables liées aux loisirs de plein air. Cet article résume les leçons tirées de la recherche ayant permis d'élaborer le guide et propose des stratégies pour tirer parti des possibilités de développement communautaire offertes par les loisirs de plein air. Outre leur pertinence au-delà de la Colombie-Britannique, province étudiée, les conclusions sont également pertinentes pour d'autres enjeux liés au développement rural et communautaire.

Mots-clés : rural, développement communautaire, développement économique, loisirs de plein air, tourisme, durabilité.

1.0 Introduction

Participation in outdoor recreation is high among Canadians, with an estimated 78% participating in outdoor activities close to home (Statistics Canada, 2025). In the province of British Columbia (BC) particularly, outdoor recreation is deeply embedded in the culture, with the vast majority of residents participating in activities like hiking, biking, camping, fishing, skiing, and snowmobiling (Outdoor Recreation Council of British Columbia [ORCBC], 2022; Statistics Canada, 2025). The sector was estimated to directly contribute \$4.8 billion to the provincial economy in 2023 (Government of British Columbia, 2025a), and many British Columbians rank access to outdoor recreation as an important contributor to their decision about where to live (ORCBC, 2024). A scan of marketing materials for many rural BC destinations shows a strong focus on outdoor recreation, indicating that communities see this as a core factor in what makes them desirable places to visit and live in.

Outdoor recreation is inherently linked to rural places through its connection to natural environments and open spaces. It can be a catalyst for rural community development priorities including economic diversification, resident retention and attraction, and desirable health outcomes. Recognizing this, many communities across BC have prioritized outdoor recreation in their community development plans and initiatives, but there are persistent barriers that prevent realization of the full scope of community development benefits. These barriers, which will be explored in this article, represent threats to outdoor spaces and community well-being (Diaz Lopez, 2023). There has historically been a lack of comprehensive and place-based guidance on proven strategies to advance outdoor recreation-driven community development.

In 2024, the ORCBC commissioned research and development of a guidebook to help rural communities develop sustainable outdoor recreation economies. This article summarizes lessons learned through the research that informed the guidebook and suggests strategies to capitalize on the community development opportunities presented by outdoor recreation. The article sets the stage by discussing the benefits of outdoor recreation development for rural communities and situating the study within the project context. This is followed by a description of the study's research methods, results, and discussion, and ending with relevance to the rural development literature.

2.0 Background

2.1 Benefits and Challenges of Outdoor Recreation as a Community Development Approach

Outdoor recreation can bring many benefits to rural communities. Investing in outdoor recreation improves the lives of residents and visitors, with the potential to enhance public health, instill a greater sense of place, create new jobs, diversify the economy, and increase property values (Tolan, 2022). Spending time outdoors results in people feeling more connected to nature, which can foster a conservation mindset (DeVillie et al., 2021). Outdoor recreation supports community vibrancy (Greedy et al., 2022) and contributes to recruitment and retention of new residents, and incomes, to the community (Rogers et al., 2024). According to US research group, Headwaters Economics (2019), people are more likely to move to areas with good access to outdoor recreation, and these tend to be higher-income households. Many

communities have found that skilled workers (e.g., healthcare workers) are attracted by the increased quality of life that accompanies outdoor recreation development.

If properly managed, outdoor recreation-driven tourism can be a sustainable industry that exists alongside forestry, mining, agriculture, and other foundational sectors. For example, Tolan (2022) describes conditions in Fremont County, Wyoming, where one community with an economy that is strongly linked to the oil and gas industry feels the full effects of the boom and bust cycle, whereas another community has been more stable given its diversified economy, which includes outdoor recreation alongside other sectors—including oil and gas. Mature outdoor economies experience many benefits beyond tourism as new businesses emerge to support recreationists and an ethic of entrepreneurship grows in the community.

Outdoor recreation also offers a pathway to reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples (Erickson, 2025; Rebonne, 2024). As outdoor recreation is inherently land-based, it can serve as a platform to build or deepen mutually supportive relationships between non-Indigenous communities and the Indigenous Nations on whose territories the activities occur. To successfully advance reconciliation, however, initiatives must acknowledge and contribute to addressing past and potential harms linked to colonial practices in outdoor recreation. This approach is demonstrated by Parks Canada—the federal agency responsible for administration of national parks in Canada. The agency’s reconciliation actions are forefronted by an acknowledgement of how colonial management practices have caused damage to Indigenous communities by altering relationships to territory (Parks Canada, 2025).

Despite the many benefits that outdoor recreation can bring to communities, there are also challenges that are common in rural areas where outdoor recreation is a central theme in the community. Careful planning is important to prevent and manage challenges when they arise.

The higher levels of land use and visitation that accompany successful outdoor recreation development can cause unintended consequences on the environment and community. Concerns related to degradation of the natural environment are typically centered around impacts to wildlife and biodiversity (Hjerpe, 2018; Loosen et al., 2023). Similarly, outdoor recreation development, typically when aligned with rural tourism initiatives, can stress existing community infrastructure and services—like housing, transportation, emergency services, and healthcare—due to the increase of people and development in the community, especially when that increase happens on an intermittent or seasonal basis (Perkins, 2024). If a community does not have the capacity to plan, monitor, and adapt to these challenges, the quality of the experience, as well as community support, can decline.

Change always has the potential to bring conflict. Outdoor recreation communities have found that disagreements can arise between recreation groups and other users of the land base (e.g., natural resource industries) about how public lands should be managed and utilized. Another potential source of conflict arises when new residents or an increased number of tourists arrive in a small community where existing residents may not support the resulting social change (Nepal & Jamal, 2011). In reference to the same Wyoming example discussed above, Tolan’s (2022) research participants stressed the importance of maintaining the rural character of the region and avoiding gentrification. Research has shown that attitudes of residents toward tourism development are dependent on the community’s ability to mitigate negative impacts on social conditions and local resources (Martin et al., 2024; Montgomery, 2025).

Finally, though outdoor recreation development can create new economic opportunities, including generating employment, some of the resulting jobs (e.g., guiding) do not offer stable, year-round employment or competitive compensation (Government of Canada, n.d.a, n.d.b). Economic opportunities can also be vulnerable to destabilizing threats that diminish the outdoor experience, like a low snowpack or wildfires.

Our review of the literature on the benefits and challenges of outdoor recreation-driven community development identified that some of the benefits of outdoor recreation are well established, but the literature tends to be focused on rural tourism with comparatively little attention paid to benefits for long-term residents. Further, most examples centre on areas where outdoor recreation is already well established and there is very limited guidance for small communities seeking to build a strong outdoor recreation development ecosystem from the ground up.

2.2 Outdoor Recreation Development in British Columbia

Rural BC is characterized by small communities that demonstrate differing levels of economic development and diversification (Government of British Columbia, 2025b). Rural communities face challenges brought on by decades of government withdrawal and downloading of responsibilities (Ryser et al., 2019, Ryser et al., 2024). In addition, the complex geographic landscape creates accessibility and remoteness challenges that, among other factors, have slowed the transition to more diverse, sustainable, and inclusive local economies (Ryser et al., 2024). This landscape, however, also provides the basis for a strong outdoor recreation culture and sector. With over 90% of the province being primarily forested or mountainous public land—also known as Crown land—opportunities for development of trails, water access, campsites, and other outdoor recreation assets abound. This combination of physical and community landscapes creates both challenges and opportunities for leveraging outdoor recreation for community development in BC.

BC is not alone in its adoption of outdoor recreation as a catalyst for community development. Our background research drew on studies from several other primarily rural North American regions, including parts of the western United States and northern Canada. However, as factors like legislation, jurisdiction, environmental attributes, and culture substantially influence the way outdoor recreation projects are carried out, lessons from other regions must be viewed with as much attention to how those areas differ as to how they are similar.

2.3 Project Context

The ORCBC is an umbrella organization serving primarily provincial recreation associations and community-based outdoor recreation groups like trail associations and snowmobile clubs. It works with member organizations, governments—provincial, local, and First Nations—and the public to implement programs that promote safe and enjoyable outdoor experiences for British Columbians. With a mandate that spans multiple outdoor recreation sectors, ORCBC occupies a distinctive role in BC's outdoor recreation landscape by engaging a broad range of recreation interests. Recognizing the growing interest among rural BC communities in accessing the benefits of outdoor recreation and a lack of available context-relevant supportive resources, the organization launched an initiative to develop an evidence-based outdoor recreation guidebook in 2024. The intent of the guidebook

was to provide community-based entities with strategies, best practices, and tools to support sustainable community development through outdoor recreation. Guidebook development was informed by research and consultation with various individuals and organizations involved in outdoor recreation in BC, including several communities that have successfully used outdoor recreation to grow and diversify their local economy. Key lessons from this research form the basis of this article.

For the purposes of this research, we adopted ORCBC's definition of outdoor recreation: "Activities that take place in natural settings: most commonly parks, trails, and natural aquatic areas. Not including activities that take place in highly cultivated recreation areas such as playgrounds or sports fields" (Diaz Lopez, 2023, p. i). We take a broad view of outdoor recreation-driven community development, considering diverse influential factors like assets (e.g., trails, boat launches), experiences (e.g., youth programs, guided trips), businesses (e.g., bike shops, commercial lodges), outdoor recreation product design/manufacturing (e.g., local outdoor clothing manufacturers), and relationships with aligned sectors (e.g., tourism) and other users of the land base (e.g., forestry).

3.0 Methods

This research took a qualitative case study approach, using a combination of literature review and focus groups for data collection and validation. A literature review was used to identify preliminary factors, best practices, and notable resources related to prominent themes in outdoor recreation development, including asset development, community collaboration, and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. Focus groups were subsequently used to ground the guidebook within the context of the BC case region. We took a purposeful sampling approach, constructing a maximum variation sampling framework that identified key variables (sector, geographic region, development stage) and aimed to maximize variation in participation (Suri, 2011). Six focus groups were held with representatives from the following sectors:

- community and local government
- economic development
- tourism
- local outdoor recreation (e.g., trail clubs)
- environment/conservation
- provincial government

Focus groups were held online. There is debate in the literature about the benefits and drawbacks of online focus groups, including whether this method improves or reduces depth of discussion, and whether participants are able to effectively interact and develop a rapport (Jones et al., 2022); however, this method was essential to allow for participation by representatives from around BC within the bounds of project resources. There was a total of 37 participants. To gather diverse perspectives, the research team aimed for representation from across BC's economic development regions and from communities of differing sizes and at different stages of outdoor recreation development. Participants in each two-hour focus group were asked to share:

- what elements of outdoor recreation are well or not well understood as opportunities to advance community development;
- what successes and challenges have been experienced by communities involved in outdoor recreation development; and
- what communities need to know in order to pursue community development through outdoor recreation.

Two research team members attended each focus group: one to facilitate and one to take notes. Focus groups were also recorded and transcribed. Participants were also asked to share resources and ideas during the focus group using the online chat feature, and to fill out a short survey at the end of the focus group. All collected data, including transcripts of focus group recordings, survey results, research team notes, and chat records were analyzed with the assistance of NVivo Qualitative Analysis software. Documents were coded manually by a single member of the research team. An inductive approach was used, identifying and refining themes as they emerged from the data (Lune & Berg, 2021, Chapter 10; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). As a result, each document was reviewed multiple times. Once a list of themes was established, it was validated with the research team and compared with the results of the literature review.

The focus group results provided the primary input to the creation of a draft guidebook where findings related to key ‘elements’ of outdoor recreation development, with cases and resources provided as examples. This draft guidebook was validated through three additional focus groups. Again, we took a purposeful sampling approach, including representatives from various sectors, geographic regions, and community sizes. There was a total of 13 participants in each 1.5-hour focus group. Each participant was asked to share their perspectives on the guidebook and comment on content they thought was missing or how the guidebook structure could be improved. Results were manually coded and used to inform revisions to the guidebook.

All phases of research and guidebook development also benefitted from the input of a technical advisory group, which consisted of eight outdoor recreation experts from local government, provincial government, outdoor recreation, tourism, conservation, and community economic development. The advisory group was consulted to provide input on the focus groups, comment on research outputs (literature review, focus group summaries), review the guidebook, and advise on the rollout of the guidebook.

In total, the project engaged 58 individuals with expertise in outdoor recreation development. Despite the best efforts of the research team to include diverse representation in the focus groups, participant availability limited the extent of perspectives gathered from certain groups, including motorized recreation and Indigenous Peoples.

4.0 Results and Discussion

Reflecting the diverse nature of research participants, results demonstrated that communities have taken diverse pathways to outdoor recreation development and are at very different points on the spectrum of fledgling to mature outdoor recreation economies. However, despite this diversity, common perspectives and lessons were evident in the data. Below, we organize these perspectives by theme, offering the most prominent results from the two sets of focus groups alongside related evidence from the literature. Each theme includes a discussion of both barriers and bridges to

a successful outdoor recreation development initiative. Barriers can be thought of as challenges that stall momentum or result in suboptimal outcomes, while bridges can be thought of as strategies for overcoming barriers. The themes below are presented in no particular order—our research confirmed that the themes are highly related and dependent on one another.

4.1 Prioritizing Community Needs

Universal across the focus groups was a common theme of ‘community first’, with key informants underscoring the importance of outdoor recreation development aligning with, serving, and benefitting community needs and values. A community-first approach ensures outdoor recreation is primarily designed to appeal to its first users and avoids conflicts that arise when community resources are dedicated to programs that are not perceived to benefit current residents. This finding is reflected in the literature. Lankford et al. (2003) review numerous studies that, collectively, demonstrate increased community support for tourism when enhanced outdoor recreation services are provided for residents.

In our focus groups, this theme included the importance of understanding why and for whom outdoor recreation assets are being built or supported, with the emphasis on who is already there. Knowing this purpose helps focus activities, therefore increasing the probability of achieving intended results. Some research participants shared the perspective that not every community can, or should, be a destination for recreation tourism, but that initiatives targeted primarily at locals still resulted in many community development benefits like health improvements, resident retention/attraction, and improved quality of life.

Participants stressed that it is difficult to fully understand community needs without representative engagement of voices from across the community, including the full range of user groups and acknowledging the wide range of activities that are classified as outdoor recreation (e.g., hiking, biking, skiing, fishing, hunting, snowmobiling). Reid et al. (2000) stress that, before focusing engagement around a formalized plan for rural tourism or outdoor recreation development, it is vital to engage in pre-planning activities that assess and build community support. This includes activities like trust building and opening lines of dialogue between residents and the planning team. Focus group participants echoed this sentiment, with many noting that early relationship-building was an important success factor in their initiative (see section 4.7 below).

Community engagement processes that prioritize representation can also help illuminate the needs and perspectives of voices that have traditionally been excluded from outdoor recreation. Several research participants spoke with excitement about local efforts to expand participation in the outdoors by prioritizing inclusion in planning and removing some of the barriers discussed in the literature, such as cost, accessibility, a sense of belonging, and cultural relevance (Groulx et al., 2024; Powers et al., 2025). These efforts were recognized as being essential to an outdoor recreation development initiative that benefitted the whole community, rather than select groups.

4.2 Building on Strengths of Place

Another key theme from the focus groups was the importance of playing to a community’s strengths and unique characteristics. Place is the combination of environmental, economic, and socio-cultural factors that make up a rural

community, and explicit recognition of place is acknowledged by many scholars as a key driver of successful rural development (Vodden et al., 2019). Participants shared that their community's histories, landscapes, cultures, and individuals combined to create their most treasured outdoor recreation assets, and that, in turn, outdoor recreation strengthened a sense of place and belonging.

Linking to the idea of 'community first', when marketing a community's outdoor recreation offerings to potential visitors, several focus group members identified the importance of having a locally led identity and focusing on what truly makes a place special. Because of the prevalence of outdoor recreation assets in BC, a community's unique value proposition often comes from other, complementary contributions to community life, like the local culture or a strong local business community. One focus group member recommended communities:

focus on one thing in particular that can set you apart from other places. Don't use cliches like 'the friendliest people', because the truth is, everywhere has friendly people. You need to focus in on the one thing that makes you unique.

One example raised by a participant was the Cariboo Chilcotin region of BC, where destination marketing links the adventure associated with the historic gold rush and ranching culture to modern outdoor experiences.

Additionally, across the focus groups, there was a recognition of a divide between the different regions in BC—especially between northern and southern communities—which affected the relevance and applicability of some outdoor recreation development approaches or guidelines. This included differences in economic climate, desired and potential user levels, and capacity. For example, some northern representatives spoke of a desire to attract users, while southern representatives were more often trying to manage overuse. This finding underscores a theme in the rural development literature related to the problems that can arise when theoretical 'solutions' are transferred from one rural place to another without regard for local context (Markey et al., 2008a).

4.3 Accessing Maximum Benefit and Value

Research participants engaged in extensive discussions about the economic benefits their communities have experienced as a result of outdoor recreation development, including economic diversification, tourism, resident recruitment and retention, and increased entrepreneurship. Case studies shared by participants demonstrated that, from an economic development perspective, it is important to underscore the potential for outdoor recreation to contribute to economic *diversification*, not economic *transition*, as single-industry dependence promotes vulnerability, regardless of the industry. Also important is the consideration of the full range of business development potential, including not only retail and services, but also design and manufacturing of outdoor recreation-related equipment and industries that service recreation businesses like marketing and journalism. In this way, outdoor recreation can resemble a cluster—groups of closely interconnected industries operating within a specific geography (Rosiello et al., 2015).

Several research participants also stressed the need to intentionally develop outdoor recreation in a way that ensures sustained access to these benefits. They spoke of a disconnect between who pays for outdoor recreation (often communities and local

non-profit recreation groups with volunteer workforces) and who benefits (often visitors and businesses), at least directly. These sentiments were especially prevalent in communities where tourism plays a significant role in the outdoor recreation economy. One focus group participant stated:

maintaining trail networks is expensive, and there's a lot of work that goes into it. The more visitors you get, the harder that is. And the visitors come and spend money in the community, but that money doesn't come back to the trails.

This disconnect, which is common in outdoor recreation communities (Nowak & Heldt, 2023), can cause conflict and strain the sustainability of the initiative as non-profit groups continuously struggle to secure funding and recruit volunteers to fuel their vital contributions. Example solutions included efforts to encourage tourists to give back to the places they visit, such as the ‘Thanksgiving Back’ campaign in Revelstoke, BC, where volunteers contribute to community projects in exchange for free accommodation (Tourism Revelstoke, 2024). This type of regenerative approach to tourism is a strategic priority for major Canadian tourism organizations (Destination Canada, n.d.), however our research indicates it is not well developed in small communities where an outdoor recreation economy is still emerging.

Focus group participants mentioned that, as a first step, communities should ensure their outdoor recreation development initiatives incorporate opportunities to capture maximum visitor–user spending through a variety of means. Opportunities that contribute directly to the groups providing recreation infrastructure include user fees, memberships, donations, and special event fees. Messages that normalize voluntary contributions increase the success of these campaigns (Nowak & Heldt, 2023). Opportunities that contribute to the broader community include outdoor retail and service providers (e.g., outfitters), food services, and accommodation. These offerings need to be enticing enough to minimize situations where visitors come with all their gear and supplies, avoiding any spending within the community. We found that some non-profit recreation groups have successfully encouraged their local business community to return a portion of their profits or take up sponsorships to fund the infrastructure that draws in many of their customers.

4.4 Advancing Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples

Outdoor recreation has contributed to colonialism and caused harm to Indigenous Peoples, not least by developing outdoor recreation experiences on unceded Indigenous land, largely without consent, and excluding Indigenous communities from accessing the benefits of outdoor recreation (Rebonne, 2024; Shah & Badaloo, 2023). The shifting provincial landscape related to reconciliation and outdoor recreation was a significant theme in the focus groups. Ongoing implementation of the British Columbia Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (a law which establishes the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the provincial framework for reconciliation) was identified as a driver of inclusion and improving relationships, but also a source of uncertainty, as some communities struggled to grasp practical pathways to reconciliation. Others who had experienced successful partnerships with Indigenous groups spoke strongly of the need to, and benefits of, meaningfully engaging in reconciliation as part of their initiatives, and of recognizing and empowering Indigenous communities as leaders in the outdoor recreation space (e.g., through support for Indigenous-led outdoor recreation).

Within the focus groups, the majority of related discussions focused specifically on First Nations, rather than Indigenous Peoples more broadly, owing to the connection to land-based Rights and Title. There was consensus between key informants around the need for relationship building and collaborations with the First Nations upon whose traditional territory the outdoor recreation is taking place. Participants shared experience-based success factors for these types of engagement. These included partnering on projects prioritized by the Nations themselves (i.e., instead of seeking support for a project prioritized by non-Indigenous groups), engaging in a way that is respectful of the Nation's individual protocols, and building relationships and engaging early on in an outdoor recreation development initiative (i.e., before anything is requested of the First Nation). One focus group member shared:

whenever I'm invited to talk about partnership building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, I say, if you don't start today, you're already late. Start before you ask for an [archaeology] study. Start before you ask for a partnership agreement...And I understand that that's not an easy process to follow, but it's never too early to start that partnership process between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

BC-specific guidance developed by experts in First Nations engagement provides additional direction (Marcy & Stuart, n.d.):

- take the time to learn about colonialism and local First Nations before attempting to reach out;
- treat First Nations as neighbours and avoid formal or transactional approaches;
- be patient, consistent, and respectful when attempting to engage; and
- be prepared to adjust your initiative to accommodate the needs and perspectives of First Nations.

4.5 Protecting and Enhancing the Environment

Focus group discussions emphasized the need for outdoor recreation initiatives to acknowledge and protect against impacts on wildlife and the environment more broadly. There was also recognition of this topic being challenging given common perceptions of outdoor recreation as environmentally benign, especially compared to other economic drivers like mining. Concerns around environmental impact are substantiated by the expanding field of recreation ecology (Marion et al., 2016). Some focus groups expressed a vision of outdoor recreation being 'nature positive', a term that refers to human activities that restore and actually enhance the environment (Locke et al., 2021). This is becoming more common through recreation-led stewardship activities, like an invasive weed pull organized by a local trail association.

Mitigation activities discussed by participants varied in the level of capacity required for implementation and the resulting degree of benefit to the environment. Huddart and Stott (2019) assert that these activities should be based on the best available scientific knowledge, combined with evidence on how users interact with a recreation asset and the land base; however, our research participants reported that a lack of available data hinders localized understandings of environmental impact.

One of the more frequently discussed interventions was visitor use management, with participants referring to cases that exemplify the potential consequences of unchecked outdoor recreation use. As explained by Park et al. (2008), visitor use management strategies can include indirect activities like signage and education, and more direct activities like visitor caps and fencing, with direct activities being more likely to have a positive environmental impact.

Focus group participants also recognized the relationship between outdoor recreation and climate change, primarily in terms of the threats posed to outdoor recreation (e.g., through environmental impacts such as increased wildfire incidence and lower snowpacks). Many authors have noted that outdoor recreation activities can also have a negative impact on climate resilience (e.g., through emissions associated with recreational pursuits), and that efforts are needed to both reduce emissions and adapt recreation infrastructure to anticipated climate change impacts (Aritza, 2023; Miller et al., 2022). This theme links back to the concept of ‘community first’ (section 4.1), as assets or experiences that allow locals to recreate close to home can help reduce emissions associated with travel (Grofelnik et al., 2023).

4.6 Building a Strong and Sustainable Team

People were at the heart of many focus group discussions, with recognition that the team responsible for an outdoor recreation development initiative is a critical determinant of success. It was acknowledged that a central member of any team is the ‘champion’—the individual or group who is the driving force behind an initiative, especially during the early stages. The champion builds initial relationships, solicits support from across the community, and keeps outdoor recreation near the top of the list of competing community priorities. One focus group participant shared that in their area, “what it boiled down to was a very committed group of people that were willing to volunteer their time to build it, and they were able to solicit a lot of support through the community”. Participants shared that to be successful, champions were most often local with deep ties to place, empowered to pursue change in their communities, dedicated, and skilled in one or more areas that were relevant to the outdoor recreation development initiative (e.g., trail building, planning). Other outdoor recreation studies (e.g., Perkins, 2024) also acknowledge the important role of the champion, stressing that passion, motivation, and a commitment to inclusion and collaboration are necessary traits.

Another notable factor related to outdoor recreation teams was volunteerism, with focus group participants acknowledging that volunteers are the lifeblood of many initiatives and organizations. Volunteers bring local expertise, cost-effectiveness, and community engagement to outdoor recreation projects (Halsall & Forneris, 2019; McClelland & Johnston, 2015). However, our research participants also recognized a risk of overreliance on volunteers—a growing concern in rural areas that have traditionally relied on strong social capital. Examples were raised of instances where volunteer burnout created capacity challenges in small communities, and where loss of critical volunteers stymied the success of an outdoor recreation initiative. Many communities expressed a need for the typical outdoor recreation funding model in BC to evolve so as to better support or lessen reliance on volunteers.

4.7 Managing Relationships and Conflict

As noted above, people factored heavily into focus group conversations, and where there are people, there are relationships and conflict. A successful outdoor recreation

development initiative—especially one that translates to gains in community development—requires participation from many different groups across the community and beyond. Key informants identified a range of organizations and roles that should be involved in outdoor recreation but specifically emphasized the importance of meaningful relationships with First Nations. Transparency and trust were acknowledged as critical inputs to relationship building processes, with one focus group participant summarizing the common perspective that the process takes time: “There really isn't a shortcut other than sitting down and talking to people...It's those face-to-face conversations...You don't go and talk to somebody once and build trust and understanding.”

Some participants stressed the need to pay attention to capacity and power imbalances that may exist between potential user groups or other organizations involved in developing outdoor recreation. Without acknowledging these imbalances and actively reaching out to traditionally underrepresented groups, initiatives have the potential to further problematic exclusionary practices which have been recorded in the context of outdoor recreation (Kling, 2024).

Relationships were also noted as a precursor to effective collaboration, which was seen as important for minimizing and navigating conflict, and for the co-construction of initiatives that have broad buy-in. Participants raised collaboration as a strategy for enhancing the community's capacity to implement outdoor recreation alongside aligned goals like conservation and active transportation, in that it allows small organizations to pool and leverage limited resources.

There was general agreement among focus group participants that an initiative's ability to mitigate and manage conflict was a strong determinant of success. Several examples of conflict were provided, with varying forms (e.g., between residents and visitors, between recreational users and others with a stake in land management, between different recreational user groups competing for a share of scarce resources), and drivers (e.g., fear of loss of access, uncertain rights or decision-making powers). Poor conflict management was discussed as having the potential to stall momentum, result in environmental impacts, damage recreation assets, advance prejudice against certain groups (e.g., First Nations), or even spill over into broader community or inter-community conflict. Participants therefore noted the essential need for outdoor recreation leaders to be aware of the potential for conflict and trained in effective conflict management practices. They spoke of the role of collaborative master planning in mitigating conflict by providing a venue where diverse input is actively sought and integrated into strategies that have broad community support. Other authors have also noted the importance of planning as a strategy to avoid conflict in outdoor recreation (Cheng, 2006; Wheeler et al., 2025).

4.8 Planning for the Long Term

Investments in outdoor recreation can bring lasting benefits to communities, and research participants spoke of how assets developed decades ago see continued use by residents and visitors. They also discussed challenges to sustaining the success of an initiative, particularly those relating to funding. Communities often struggled to find funding that supports maintenance of existing infrastructure, with most grant programs limiting eligibility to new initiatives. As explained by one focus group participant:

Most of the outdoor recreation opportunities in our area of BC are operated by societies ... and their largest barrier in terms of supporting that work is funding to maintain the trail systems. There's always grants to build a new one, but having support to maintain them was what was lacking.

This led to an issue raised by multiple informants where a local recreation group used one-time funding to build an asset but then, lacking the ongoing funding needed to sustain operations, dissolved shortly after construction, leaving the asset with uncertain responsibility for maintenance. The challenge of a shortage of operational funding is not unique to outdoor recreation and has plagued rural development across BC (Hammond, 2023). Organizations often look to local governments to take on long-term maintenance of outdoor recreation assets, but most local governments are already struggling to maintain other elements of aging community infrastructure, in part owing to outdated jurisdictional and fiscal powers that limit potential alternative revenue sources (Ryser et al., 2024).

Another commonly discussed barrier to long-term success was ad hoc development, where multiple recreation groups implemented projects that served their own interests but did not consider the wider needs of the community. This led to inefficient use of scarce resources (e.g., funding, volunteer effort), conflict between user groups, and a lack of attention to the cumulative impacts of recreation.

To mitigate these challenges, focus group members offered potential solutions. Long-term collaborative recreation master planning with realistic timelines helps establish a vision that keeps activities focused on an identified goal that is broadly supported by the community and achievable with available funding. However, this type of planning is not effective—and can actually be damaging to community relationships—without a commitment to implementation (Markey et al., 2008b). Improved data gathering was also discussed as a potential pathway to long-term sustainability, in that it can help signal early issues that could grow into major challenges (e.g., environmental degradation, negative community sentiments) or provide evidence of impact or need to support funding applications.

5.0 Conclusions and Contributions

Our research with communities and organizations in rural BC demonstrates the wide range of community and economic development benefits that can be achieved through outdoor recreation, as well as some of the common issues that limit success. Experienced communities generally agree that there are factors that improve the probability of success of an outdoor recreation development initiative. These include adopting a community-first mindset, ensuring meaningful engagement across the community and with Indigenous partners, intentionally planning to develop in a way that maximizes access to potential benefits, being inclusive and collaborative, and minimizing negative externalities like environmental, social, and cultural impacts. There are also common challenges that represent persistent barriers to the achievement of goals, such as a shortage of long-term funding, data gaps, and conflict. Our research offers strategies and best practices for overcoming these barriers.

This research contributes to the literature on outdoor recreation-driven community development by addressing the shortage of studies that see outdoor recreation as first and foremost a pathway to benefits for the existing community rather than tourists

or future residents. In addition, this research fills a gap in available guidance targeted at communities that are very early in their outdoor recreation development journey. The consolidation of results that span multiple themes in outdoor recreation development is helpful to communities seeking a big picture view rather than an in-depth discussion of specific processes or practices. The interrelation and mutual dependencies of the themes, combined with each community's unique context reinforces that there is no linear process for outdoor recreation-driven community development.

Results from this study are highly applicable to our case study region of rural BC and other rural places in Canada but are somewhat limited in their transferability to other jurisdictions given the importance of the regulatory, planning, and funding contexts in determining how recreation assets are developed, and by whom. The relevance of our research also extends beyond outdoor recreation to include other pathways to community development, as many of the themes we examine are echoed in studies from other rural development fields.

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