

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

DRAFT shared at public working session on 8/30/2023

The DNR is seeking feedback on ideas for creating new and/or enhancing existing recreation opportunities in the Upper Minnesota River Valley. The DNR is committed to investing in outdoor recreation as part of the Upper Sioux Agency State Park land transfer process. People were able to share feedback at two meetings held on June 29th, as well as submit feedback online through Engage with DNR. There were a total of 140 comments as of August 23rd, with 29 comment forms from the meetings on June 29th and 111 comments submitted online. You may share additional thoughts by completing the online feedback form.

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

Respondent Characteristics

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

Most Recent Upper Sioux Agency State Park Visit	Percent
Within the past week	19%
Within the past month	14%
Within the past year	30%
More than one year ago	30%
I have never visited USASP	7%

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.

How many miles do you live from Upper Sioux Agency State Park?	Percent
10 miles or less	24%
11-50 miles	28%
51-100 miles	27%
101 miles or more	22%

Commenters were most likely to be white. A larger share of feedback was provided by women than men.

Race / Ethnicity	Percent
White	93%
American Indian or Alaska Native	2%
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)	6%

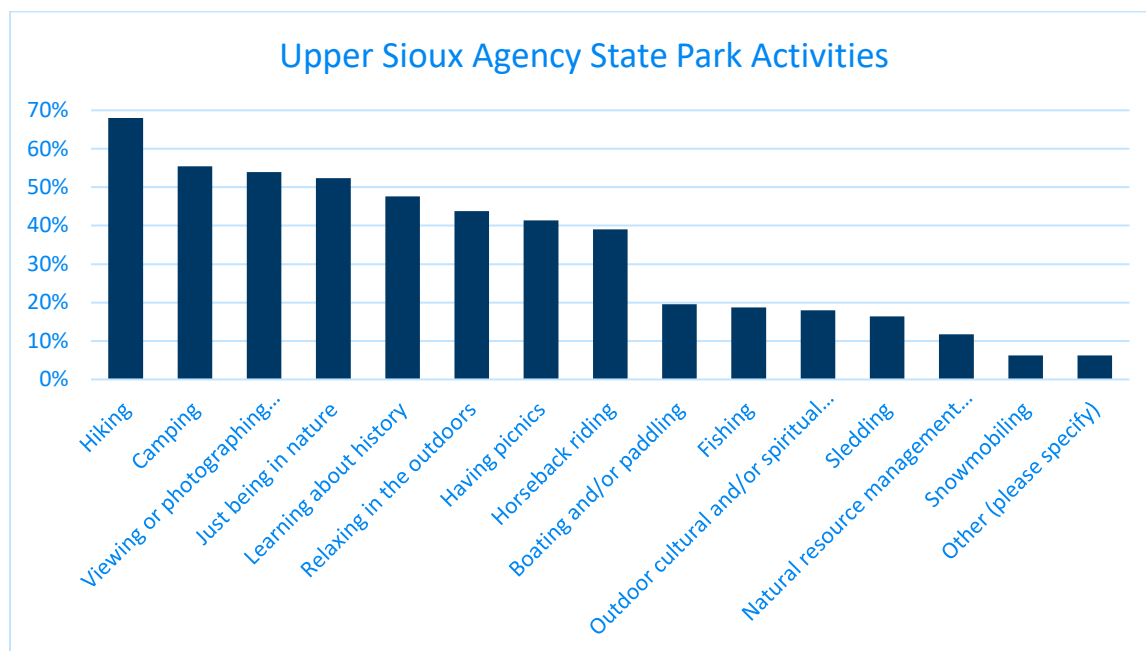
**People could select multiple racial/ethnic identities. This table excludes those who preferred not to answer.*

Gender	Percent
Female	63%
Male	31%
Non-binary	0%
Prefer to self-identify (please specify)	2%

** This table excludes those who preferred not to answer.*

Outdoor Activities

Commenters reported participating in similar activities at Upper Sioux Agency State Park as 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.

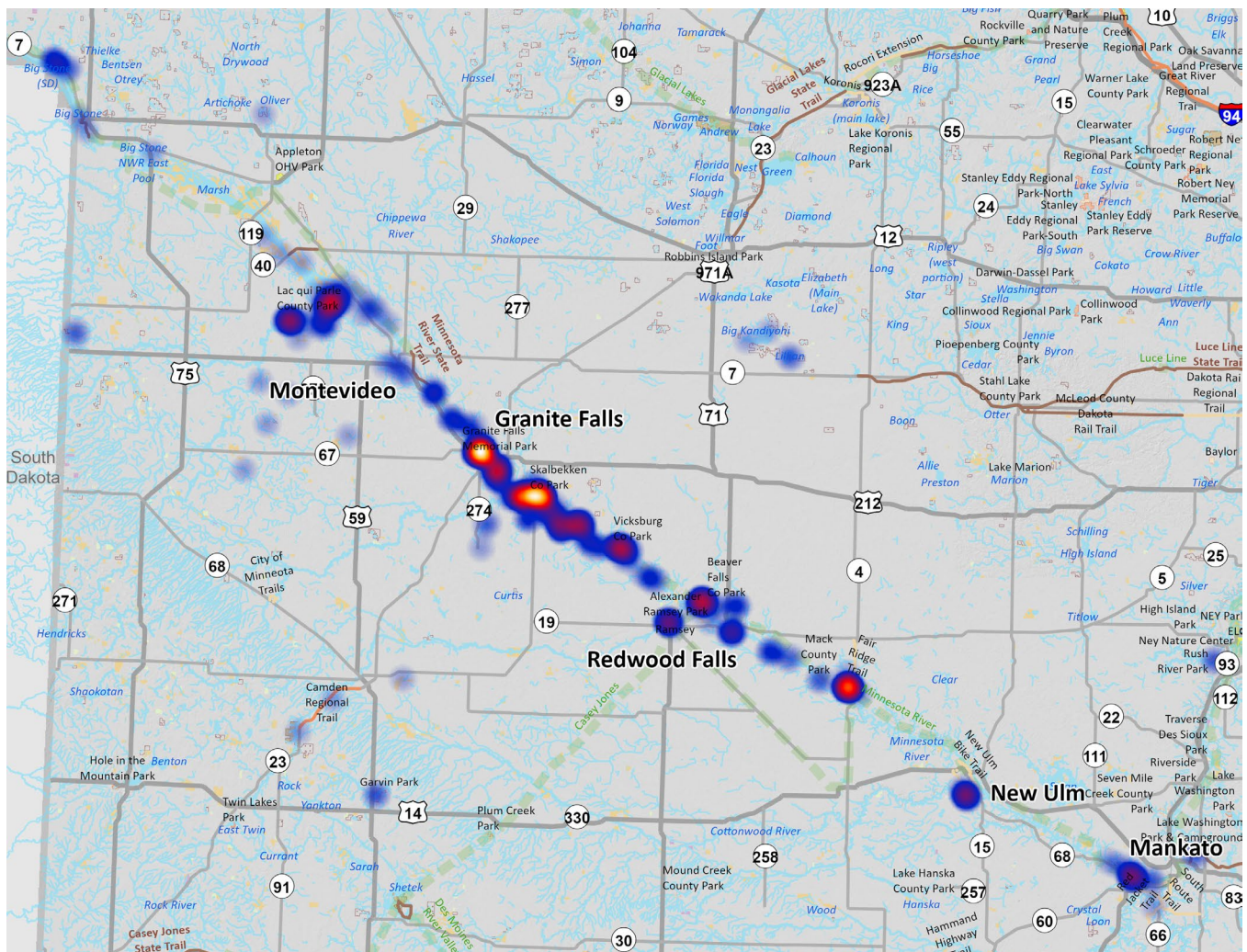


**Full labels: Viewing or photographing wildlife and/or nature, Outdoor cultural and/or spiritual activities, and Natural resource management and/or citizen science*

Heat Map of Outdoor Recreation in the Region

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. Through the feedback provided thus far, the “local area” can be defined 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 have mentioned lands in the prairie or further downstream on the Minnesota River.

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

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).

Camping and lodging: The feedback supported additional overnight accommodations to attract people to the area including traditional campsites, cabins and teepees. Some commented on the importance of specific camping amenities such as spacing between sites and electric/water hookups.

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.

Public lands and conservation

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.

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. Some comments supported the creation of a new state park and others focused on the opportunities provided by new lands rather than focusing on the type of land designation.

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.

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.

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.

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. Some supported investments in programs, services, and signs to tell these stories. 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.

Important Values and Considerations

Engaging with partners: People suggested the DNR work with a range of partners 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 partner 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 emphasized the opportunity for new possibilities for telling stories.

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.

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.

Next Steps

The DNR is using the above information to help guide additional public engagement and further refine ideas for outdoor recreation in the region. This information will be shared at working sessions in Granite Falls and will be available on the DNR's website.