



PRACTICAL GUIDE TO THE

Visitor Use Management Framework (VUMF)

Distilling the VUMF Principles for Everyday Application



INTRODUCTION

Managing visitor use in public lands is essential for protecting natural and cultural resources and ensuring positive outdoor experiences. The [Visitor Use Management Framework \(VUMF\)](#) offers a simple, adaptable approach for land managers, community organizations, nonprofits, and partners to collaboratively manage visitor use.

Why Visitor Use Management Matters

Public lands provide opportunities for connection, learning, and recreation. However, unmanaged or poorly managed use can:



Damage natural and cultural resources.



Create crowding or conflicts among visitors.



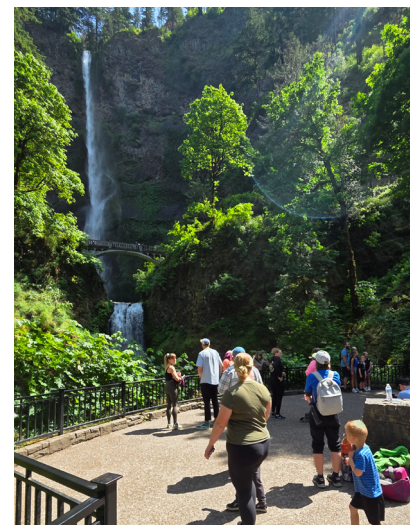
Limit equitable access and opportunities for visitors and local communities.

Visitor Use Management (VUM) provides a structured, repeatable process to address these challenges and plan for sustainable, enjoyable visitor experiences and resource stewardship.

What Is the VUMF?

The VUMF is a step-by-step decision-making process developed by six U.S. federal land and water management agencies. Its goal is to consider access, resource protection, and visitor experiences across diverse settings. The framework is flexible, scalable, and applicable to any site, from national parks to local recreation areas. It helps planners, managers, and stakeholders:

- Explore and understand the root cause of visitor use issues.
- Define what desired conditions for resource protection and visitor experience look like.
- Prioritize strategies and management actions and efficiently allocate existing resources.
- Explore the impacts of each type of management solution (education, engineering, and enforcement).
- Evaluate whether management approaches are effective, and when to adjust to meet desired conditions.



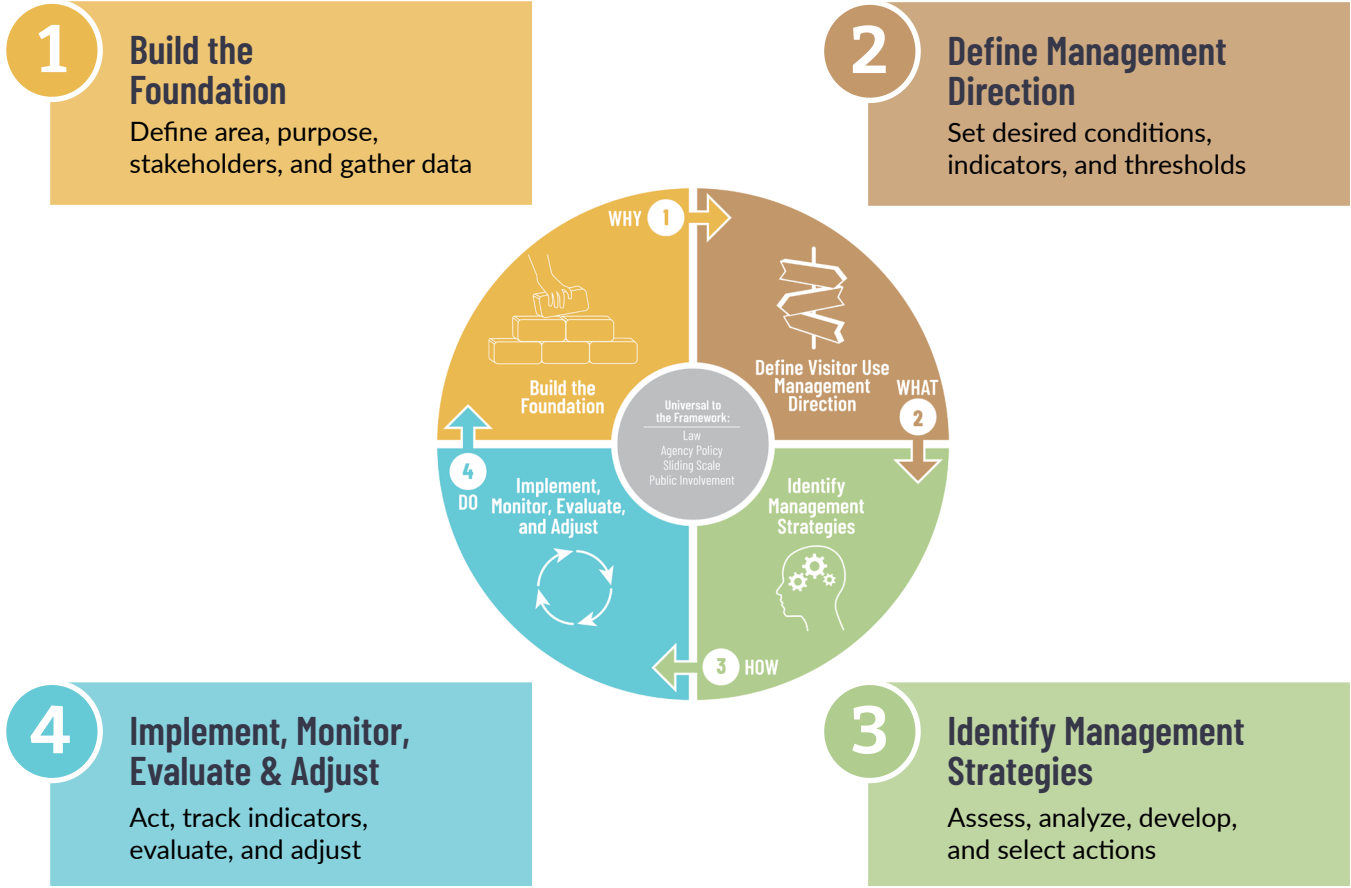
Core Principles of the VUMF

- **Collaboration:** Managers, partners, and communities work together.
- **Transparency:** Decision-making processes are open and clear and are informed by available data.
- **Adaptability:** The framework can be scaled for large or small projects and protected areas of different types and sizes.
- **Inclusion:** Equitable opportunities for all people to connect with public lands.
- **Outcome-Focused:** Emphasis is on desired conditions and results.



THE FOUR STEPS OF THE VUMF

The VUMF consists of four main steps. Each step builds on the previous one, forming a logical flow from project purpose to evaluation and adaptation.



Source: [Visitor Use Management Framework, 2016 published by the Interagency Visitor Use Management Council.](#)

Step 1: Build the Foundation

What are we managing for, and who needs to be involved?

- **Define the Area:** Identify the site or zone you are managing.
- **Establish the Purpose:** Clarify why visitor use is being managed (e.g., resource protection, experience quality).
- **Engage Interested Parties:** Involve staff, partners, local communities, and visitors early.
- **Gather Existing Data:** Review current conditions, past studies, laws, and policies.

Tips:

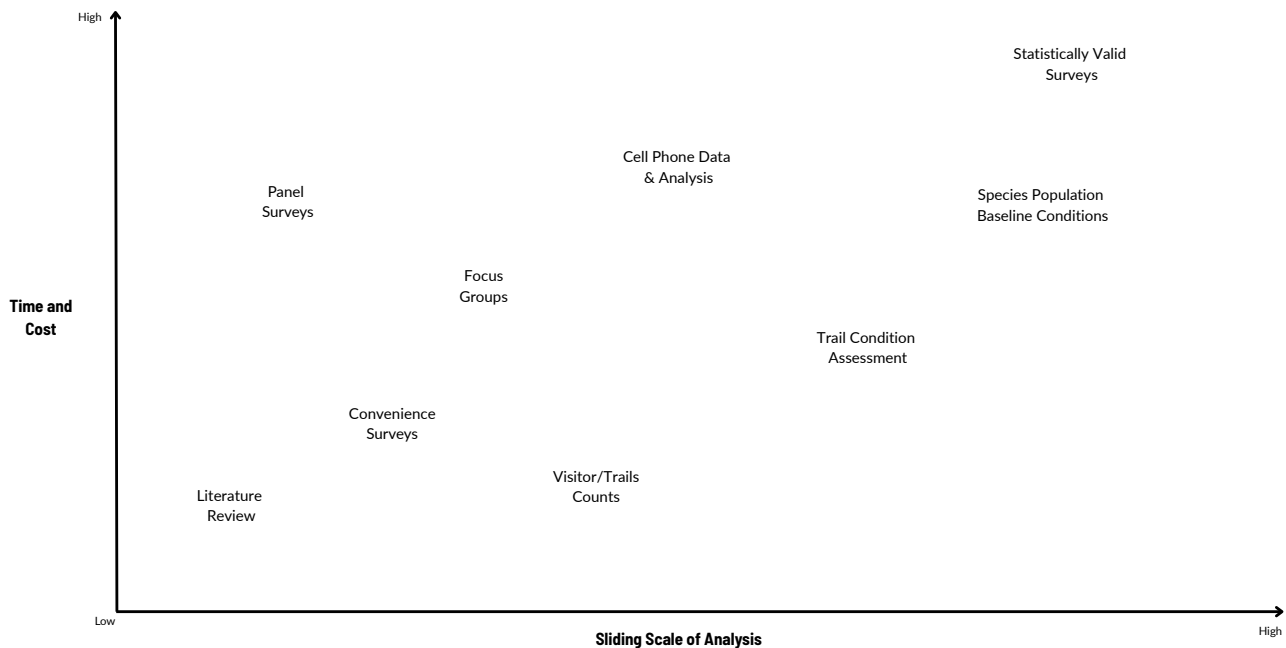
- Identify if there are Treaty Rights for the project area and engage Tribes before any public outreach.
- Use maps, visitor surveys, and public meetings to understand the area and its users.
- Use a **sliding scale** approach to determine the level of effort for engagement and data collection.

DATA COLLECTION

It can feel overwhelming to think about undertaking a data collection effort among everything else going on! Really think about what you need and what would be nice to have. Use the Recreation Data Matrix and consider these questions:

1. What data sources are available, accurate and relevant for your project?
2. How will the identified data inform the project?
3. How much confidence is there in existing data?
4. What is your time and budget to collect new data?
5. Do you need outside or technical assistance?

RECREATION DATA MATRIX



Step 2: Define Visitor Use Management Direction

What are we trying to achieve?

- **Determine Desired Conditions:** Clearly describe what you want the area to be like for resources and visitors.
- **Identify Indicators:** Track conditions related to recreation and visitor use to assess changes over time.
- **Establish Thresholds:** Set specific limits for each indicator that signal when action is needed.



Tips:

- Desired conditions should reflect the site's purpose and visitor expectations. They should also describe how natural and cultural resources should function.
- Think about resource or experiential conditions that are already being monitored. Can these serve as good indicators for your visitor use management project?
- Use the **Indicators Worksheet** to brainstorm potential indicators and select 2-3 indicators directly related to visitor use.
- Remember that a threshold represents acceptable conditions, and action should be taken before a threshold is exceeded.



Step 3: Identify Management Strategies

How will we support desired conditions and experiences?

- **Assess Current Conditions:** Compare actual conditions to desired ones using indicators and thresholds.
- **Analyze Causes:** Understand why issues exist if there is a gap between existing and desired conditions.
- **Develop Actions:** Brainstorm possible solutions (e.g., education, facility changes, signage, regulations).
- **Evaluate Alternatives:** Weigh pros and cons, considering effectiveness, cost, trade-offs, and public support.
- **Select Strategies:** Choose the most feasible options and make a plan for implementation.

Tips:

- Involve interested parties in developing and selecting alternatives to build support.
- Make sure strategies and management actions tie back to desired conditions.

The Three Es

Most management strategies fall into three categories referred to as the Three Es: education, engineering, and enforcement. Examples of these strategies include:

- Education – signage, interpretation, programming, outreach, social media, apps, public meetings, trail ambassadors, guided activities
- Engineering – trails, facilities, parking, site design, traffic flow, bridges, walkways, visitor centers
- Enforcement – regulations, seasonal closures, LEOs, patrols, tickets, permit systems, reservations

Step 4: Implement, Monitor, and Adjust

How do we know if it's working?

- **Put Strategies into Action:** Roll out chosen management actions.
- **Monitor Indicators:** Regularly measure the selected indicators to track change.
- **Evaluate Results:** Compare outcomes to thresholds and desired conditions.
- **Adjust as Needed:** If goals are not met, revisit strategies and adapt.

Tips:

- Include outreach and engagement in the rollout. Make sure people know about the changes and why actions were selected.
- Implement collaboratively. Determine the roles of agencies, partners, volunteers, and others involved in implementation.
- Monitoring should be ongoing and documented. Share results with all interested parties .





PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Every planning effort looks different, but these steps help you stay on track:

1. **Use the [sliding scale](#).** Invest staffing, funding, and time commensurate with the project's complexity.
2. **Clarify goals early.** Describe desired conditions for resources and experiences.
3. **Engage partners.** Invite interested parties, local communities, and user groups into the process.
4. **Start with data, but don't get stuck.** Use the best available information and confirm if more data is needed.
5. **Choose strategies that fit your context.** Not every tool works everywhere.
6. **Plan to adapt.** Build in monitoring and be ready to adjust.

Tools for Implementation

- **GIS Mapping Tools:** For spatial analysis and visualization of visitor use patterns.
- **Surveys (Google Forms, Survey123, Qualtrics, etc.):** Collect feedback on experiences and needs.
- **Outreach & Engagement:** Facilitate collaboration and transparency.
- **Monitoring Protocol Templates:** Evaluate environmental and social indicators.
- **Academic Research Databases:** Access to studies on visitor impacts, recreation management, and monitoring methods.



Tips for Success

- Stay flexible—conditions and needs change over time.
- Communicate clearly and regularly with all interested parties.
- Document decisions and share lessons learned.
- Use existing resources—don't reinvent the wheel; adapt proven approaches.
- Focus on outcomes, not just management actions.
- Foster a culture of learning—encourage feedback from staff, partners, volunteers, and visitors.
- Set realistic timelines for implementing strategies and monitoring results.
- Leverage technology for data collection and analysis (e.g., mobile apps, GIS).
- Establish partnerships with local organizations, universities, or volunteer groups to expand capacity.
- Make use of pilot projects to test new solutions before full-scale implementation.
- Train staff regularly to ensure consistency and effectiveness in management actions.
- Celebrate successes and acknowledge contributions of all involved parties.

References

- [IVUMC Website](#): Contains VUM Framework, guidebooks, training, case studies, and contacts for support.
- [SORP VUM resources and community of practice](#): Opportunities to share experiences and best practices.

CONCLUSION

Visitor Use Management is not about limiting people—it's about **ensuring access while protecting what makes these places special**. With this framework, land managers, communities, and partners can make clear, fair, and sustainable decisions that honor the lands, waters, and communities we serve.

