

Tourism & Outdoor Recreation Sector — Project Interview Summary

Capitol Region – Nevada County

Representative Interviewed: **Shavati Karki-Pearl**
Interviewed by: **John Wentworth**

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Assets

Think about the natural assets — public lands, parks, trails, or other features — and the community assets — community facilities, airports, train stations, unique areas, and/or cultural events — that draw visitors to the region, and how the project connects to them. Then consider what kinds of investments, whether in staff capacity, coordination, or regional information sharing, the project would most benefit from to move forward.

Consider:

- *What natural assets attract people to the region, and how does the project connect to them?*
- *What community assets attract and bring people to the region, and how does the project connect to them?*
- *What investments would most help the project advance?*

Discussion Points

Opportunities:

- **Natural Assets**
 - **Federal public land**
 - U.S. Forest Service
 - Tahoe National Forest
 - Bureau of Land Management
 - **State public land**
 - State Parks
 - South Yuba River has five state parks
 - Empire Mine and Malakoff Diggins state historic parks.
 - **Land trusts**
 - Truckee Donner and Bear Yuba land trusts
 - **Special park districts**
 - The **South Yuba River** is a major destination
 - A **gravel race** in October further activates the region seasonally
- **Community Assets and Regional Access**
 - A **strong bike community** hosts five events annually across public and private lands; bike tourism is rapidly growing
 - Cities anchor **cultural draw** through events like Hot Summer Nights, Victorian Christmas, Cornish Christmas, and the Nevada County Fair

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- **Four-season recreation** offerings — ski resorts, horseback riding, kayaking, rafting, water skiing, and hiking — attract diverse visitor segments
- The **Pines to Mines** regional trail vision and **historic downtowns** contribute to a coherent recreation identity
- **Life jacket loaner** programs from the Division of Boating and Waterways and wayfinding infrastructure support visitor safety and access

Challenges:

- **Overcrowding at key sites** (Pioneer Trail, Hoot Trail, river crossings, Donner Pass Road) is straining resources and visitor experience
- **Critical infrastructure gaps** persist across recreation sites: bathrooms, water, parking, call boxes, and safety equipment are lacking
- **Only two rangers cover three counties**, leaving state and federal lands severely understaffed
- Multiple jurisdictions at the river (3) and park districts (5) make **coordinated decision-making difficult**
- Volunteer organizations are **unsustainably carrying the maintenance burden**
- Some **park districts are exploring consolidation** due to financial strain

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Policy & Regulations

Reflect on the policies or regulations the project has encountered, and whether they have opened doors or created roadblocks. Consider also where the policy landscape simply does not match conditions on the ground, and whether a governance structure — like a joint powers authority or special district — could help bridge that gap.

Consider:

- *Which policies or regulations have helped or hindered the project?*
- *Where does the policy landscape not match reality on the ground, and what structures might help?*

Discussion Points

Opportunities:

- State funding alignment through **Explore California and climate bond programs is anticipated**, though benefits have not yet materialized
- A **Recreation Resiliency Master Plan** was proactively developed to position the region for emerging legislative and funding opportunities
- An agreement to use higher county-level parking fines at State Park sites (replacing insufficient ticket amounts) demonstrates **effective local policy workarounds**

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Challenges:

- **Duplication of NEPA & CEQA environmental review** for the same project on federal land adds significant cost, time, and effort
- **State Parks is reluctant to implement parking permits** or towing at over-visited river crossings, citing its public access mission, even as over-visitation causes harm
- The policy landscape does not yet support **integrated infrastructure improvements or streamlined cross-jurisdictional permitting**

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Funding

Consider what funding opportunities have identified and pursued, and what challenges have arisen if none are available. Think about how well current funding aligns with the actual needs and timeline — including reimbursement structures, long-term maintenance, and the ability to braid multiple sources together — and whether a capacity gap exists between the project and the funding it requires.

Consider:

- *What funding opportunities have been found, and what gaps or challenges remain?*
- *How well does available funding match the project's real needs, and can multiple funding sources be leveraged?*

Discussion Points

Opportunities:

- **Grants received from CDFW, Air District, WCB, and SNC** have supported project work; various infrastructure grants are also in pursuit

Challenges:

- The core barrier is not a lack of funding but a **fundamental misalignment**: most available funding is capital-based, while the greatest needs are operational (staffing, maintenance, planning, coordination), and project planning
- **Forest Service has only \$10,000 annually for trail maintenance**, forcing heavy reliance on volunteers and affinity groups who work for minimal compensation
- Planning and concept development funding is scarce, making it **difficult to get projects to a "shovel ready" state**
- Public works projects such as for bridges **cannot include co-located recreation improvements** such as parking lots, bathrooms, or signage
- **Reimbursement-based grants** create barriers for smaller districts and nonprofits
- Grant restrictions **prevent integrated infrastructure improvements** even when projects share a location

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Data

Think about what data resources exist in the region to support your project — things like visitation numbers, economic impact, or user behavior — and what is missing that should be measured. Consider who owns the data, what happens to it when the project ends, and whether data to demonstrate the project's value to the agencies and funders who need to act on it can be used.

Consider:

- *What data is available and what important data is still missing?*
- *Who owns the data, and can it be used to make the case to funders and decision-makers?*

Discussion Points

Opportunities:

- A river ambassador nonprofit collects **high-quality data** on visitor counts, origins, and activities, though the program lacks funding
- Existing data from partners including Tahoe National Forest, State Parks, and SYRCL demonstrates **strong visitation and economic impact**
- Emerging tools like Placer.ai and Buxton offer **potential to track visitor behavior and spending patterns**

Challenges:

- **Data is fragmented** across agencies: Forest Service (data is 3–5 years old), State Parks, and non-profit data
- **No shared dashboard or standardized metrics** exist
- Forest Service was supposed to install **trail counters for bike trails** but status unknown
- **Visit California** regional data does not break down where people recreate or show local impacts
- Without comprehensive, current visitation data, **grant applications are difficult to substantiate** and impact is hard to demonstrate
- The relationship between visitation, economic impact, and community benefit cannot be clearly or compellingly **documented**
- **Data ownership and access** across agencies remain unclear
- Capacity to build a recreation economy dashboard with multiple integrated metrics does not currently exist

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Climate Change

Reflect on whether climate change is a factor in the project — through shifting seasons, temperature fluctuations, or changing visitor behaviors — and how the project is responding or adapting. Consider whether the project is connected to climate resilience or mitigation funding, and what it would take to do so.

Consider:

- *How is climate change affecting the project, and how are the project sponsors responding?*
- *Is the project connected to climate resilience or mitigation funding opportunities?*

Discussion Points

Opportunities:

- River ambassador data suggests 80% of river visitors travel from out of town, likely **seeking relief from valley heat**
- Projects including river access management, trail planning, and shuttle systems align well with **GHG reduction, wildfire resilience, and emergency preparedness** goals
- Strong alignment with the **County's Resource Resiliency Roadmap**

Challenges:

- **Weather changes evident**; minimal snow this year forced ski resorts to close early
- **Wildfire** is a constant and growing concern across forest recreation areas
- **Proposition 4 climate bond funding** has not reached recreation work; fire-related funding is available but does not extend to recreation amenities
- A Sierra Nevada Conservancy grant application that included recreation components for a river crossing was **denied for not being "shovel ready"**
- Recreation sites are generally **not designed for climate stressors or emergency response** needs
- Despite strong alignment with climate goals, recreation projects have **not secured climate-related funding**

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Workforce

Think about the workforce gaps standing in the way of the project moving forward, and whether the project's proponents are finding the skills, contractors, and project managers they need locally. Consider also whether the project creates opportunities to build longer-term workforce pipelines through partnerships with community colleges, workforce boards, or local hire programs.

Consider:

- *What workforce gaps are slowing the project, and is the project finding the talent needed locally?*
- *Does the project create opportunities to build long-term workforce pipelines in the region?*

Discussion Points

Opportunities:

- **Many people moving to area** seek outdoor and nature-related jobs, creating a potential local talent pipeline
- **Significant job creation potential** exists if sustained funding becomes available
- **River Ambassadors provide crucial on-the-ground capacity** (visitor education, data collection, and safety compliance) serving as an effective extension of understaffed state park rangers
- **Workforce pipelines for trail building and fire break work exist** and could be strengthened with more focused investment
- **County plays an active role** filling gaps by identifying grants and writing on behalf of nonprofits that lack capacity

Challenges:

- Rural areas **struggle to attract skilled workers**
- Forest Service hires seasonal workers but **not for recreation maintenance**
- The River Ambassadors program was initially funded by State Parks but **now has zero state funding**; the supporting **nonprofit is struggling to continue**, and Nevada County cannot fully fund a program on state property
- **Heavy reliance on volunteer organizations with MOUs** is unsustainable; the **Forest Service does not compensate these groups**, who must independently raise their own operating funds
- The current **workforce model cannot be maintained** at scale without dedicated, ongoing investment
- **Significant capacity gaps** exist in grant writing, management, and implementation across partners

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Collaboratives

Reflect on the collaborative relationships your project depends on — across jurisdictions, land managers, or tribal partners — and where those relationships are accelerating progress or slowing things down. Consider whether there is a regional body or coordination structure your project needs but does not yet have access to.

Consider:

- *What collaborative relationships does your project depend on, and where are they helping or hindering?*
- *Is there a regional body or coordination structure you need but don't yet have?*

Discussion Points

Opportunities:

- The region has a **strong and proven collaborative infrastructure**: the Recreation Coalition, South Yuba River Public Safety Cohort, Pines to Mines Alliance, a new Resilience Project with a governing board, and a quarterly park district conference serving five districts
- The **South Yuba River Safety Cohort** has operated for eight years, meets weekly during summer for coordinated communication, and has received CSAC award recognition
- **Nevada County plays a critical role as a neutral convener**, not an operator, allowing it to align multiple jurisdictions and land managers around shared priorities without overstepping
- The **CCC in eastern Nevada County** brings agencies and community members together effectively

Challenges:

- Coordination requires significant ongoing time and facilitation capacity that is **not formally resourced**
- **No dedicated funding exists for collaboration** infrastructure, even though it functions as a core regional asset
- Decision-making authority is **distributed across many entities**, which can slow progress
- Collaboration is the region's greatest strength, but it is **treated as informal work** rather than funded infrastructure

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Branding & Marketing

Think about whether your project or region has a clear identity, and how effectively you are telling your story to your community, to funders, and to decision-makers at the state and federal level. Consider whether your project's brand or identity could go beyond marketing to become a tool for financing, advocacy, or building political will.

Consider:

- *Does your project or region have a clear identity, and how well are you telling that story?*
- *Could your project's brand become a financing or advocacy tool, not just a marketing one?*

Discussion Points

Opportunities:

- A **wayfinding signage project** is underway, with a digital outpost consolidating all existing maps under one QR-code-accessible platform
- A second **annual recreation fair** is in progress to build a shared regional narrative around stewardship ("Play hard, play lightly")
- Cultural districts, chamber marketing, and events organically generate **visitor awareness**
- Truckee benefits from Visit Tahoe Truckee, TBID dollars, and **professional DMO-led branding and marketing**
- The South Yuba Public River Safety Cohort has actively marketed **river safety messaging**
- A **clear identity is emerging** — Recreation Economy + Stewardship + Resilience — with strong potential as a financing and advocacy tool, not just a marketing message

Challenges:

- The **region currently lacks a comprehensive brand strategy** and has not invested in active marketing outreach
- The existing **website is passive**; the region is not attending fairs, running advertising, or telling its story proactively
- Messaging remains fragmented across agencies and partners, with **no unified narrative**
- Recreation is marketed for tourism but **not fully leveraged** as a policy and funding strategy
- As a rural county, capacity for aggressive branding and marketing is limited, and this **work consistently falls to the bottom of the priority list**