

Tourism & Outdoor Recreation Sector — Project Interview Summary

Southern Border Region – San Diego State University

Representative Interviewed: Lorna Avila
Interviewed by: Calder Johnson

1

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**
 - San Diego's abundant **sunshine and coastal geography** create a consistent, year-round outdoor recreation draw; beaches stretching from Oceanside to the Mexican border anchor the region's natural identity
 - **Mission Bay, the Pacific coastline**, and trail systems within **Balboa Park** offer diverse outdoor recreation opportunities within an accessible urban context
- **Community Assets and Regional Access**
 - The region has a dense and diverse **cultural asset base**: San Diego Zoo, the new Elephant Safari Park, Balboa Park's museums and open spaces, Seaport Village, the Port of San Diego, and a thriving small business ecosystem
 - Three **established cultural districts**, Oceanside, Barrio Logan, and Balboa Park, plus the newly designated Liberty Station Arts District, provide structured community identity anchors across the region
 - The County hired its first **arts and culture manager** and reopened its film office, signaling new institutional investment in creative economy infrastructure
 - Chula Vista's investment in a **film and media building** with green screen space and creator incentives positions the region to compete for production activity
 - **Youth engagement** has proven highly effective: a logo competition for the collaborative produced strong participation, with the youth sector lead creating

Symposium of Practice
Tourism & Outdoor Recreation Sector — Project Interview Summary
Southern Border Region – San Diego State University

the winning design, demonstrating that arts and culture resonate deeply with young people across all sectors

Challenges:

- The **Tijuana River sewage crisis** is directly affecting Imperial Beach and Coronado, threatening coastal recreation assets and visitor experience
- **Gentrification in Barrio Logan** illustrates a recurring pattern: artists and cultural investment make neighborhoods attractive, then rising costs displace the communities that created the value. This is a structural threat to the cultural districts that anchor the region's identity

2 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:

- A **highly inclusive planning** process (278 meetings conducted to reach stakeholders where they were, with three sectors added beyond the 12 required (youth, farmworkers, and LGBTQ community)) produced broader buy-in and more representative outcomes
- Policies favoring **smaller community-based organizations** in funding allocations, combined with coordination ecosystems linking large and small organizations, could more effectively distribute resources and build lasting capacity

Challenges:

- **Short-term rental market** dynamics are displacing residents in coastal communities, as investors purchase homes and build ADUs for tourist rental rather than resident housing

Symposium of Practice
Tourism & Outdoor Recreation Sector — Project Interview Summary
Southern Border Region – San Diego State University

- **Permitting structures** in some recreation sectors create permanent competitive advantages for early entrants; surf instruction permitting is a concrete example where existing permit holders maintain exclusive access, locking out new operators

3 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:

- **California Arts Council** grants are being actively communicated to artists and entrepreneurs through newsletters, extending reach into the arts community
- **San Diego Foundation** invests heavily in art and community projects, providing a significant local philanthropic anchor
- The \$750 million in **film and media tax breaks** signed by the governor represents a substantial potential investment in the region's creative economy infrastructure
- Policies recommending that funders prioritize **smaller community-based organizations**, and create coordination ecosystems between large and small groups, could improve both equity and long-term impact of investments

Challenges:

- Funders consistently **favor well-established organizations** over smaller community-based groups with limited administrative experience or staffing, concentrating resources where capacity already exists
- **Arts and library funding is reliably the first cut** during budget deficits, including loss of art teachers in schools, despite demonstrated impact such as NIH-funded culturally relevant public art that improved COVID vaccine uptake
- Despite arts being an eligible sector for Catalyst funding, the program received limited proposals in this area, suggesting an **awareness or capacity gap among arts organizations**

Symposium of Practice
Tourism & Outdoor Recreation Sector — Project Interview Summary
Southern Border Region – San Diego State University

- **Makerspaces** are expensive to build despite office vacancy rates of approximately 20%, representing a misalignment between available physical space and the capital required to convert it
- Tension exists between **directing funding** to wealthy coastal communities facing acute problems (such as Coronado's sewage crisis) and consistently underserved communities in Southeast San Diego; both have legitimate claims but compete for the same resources
- San Diego invests in artist infrastructure, but this work is vulnerable to budget cycle fluctuations and **lacks protected, sustained funding**

4 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:

- The San Diego Arts Council and Economic Development Corporation have **strong data on economic impact**, with arts and culture generating approximately \$10 billion regionally
- **San Diego Tourism Authority** maintains excellent data on visitor numbers, origins, activities, and spending, providing a solid macro-level foundation for advocacy and planning

Challenges:

- **Neighborhood-level data** for small business planning is needed for places like downtown, Pacific Beach, Mission Beach, La Jolla, and Del Mar
- Competition between coastal cities for tourism dollars intensifies the **need for detailed local data**, but the capacity to produce it does not exist at that scale

Symposium of Practice
Tourism & Outdoor Recreation Sector — Project Interview Summary
Southern Border Region – San Diego State University

- **Differentiating between what tourists need and what local residents need** is a recognized priority but has not been systematically built into data collection approaches
- **Survey fatigue** among visitors is limiting the ability to gather behavioral data on what activities tourists actually engage in

5 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:

- The **Chollas Creek Greenway** project, a 10.5-mile watershed corridor in southeast San Diego, demonstrates how climate adaptation investment can simultaneously address flooding, create ecotourism destinations, build blue-green infrastructure, capture stormwater, develop trail systems, support nearby businesses, and generate workforce opportunities, all while serving a historically disinvested community
- A \$200,000 **Groundwork San Diego ecotourism project** funded through Catalyst creates park space with natural stormwater capture and bike trail connections while directly addressing flooding risk
- **Agrotourism opportunities** with avocado farms and wineries in East County offer additional climate-adjacent recreation development potential
- The scoring rubric requiring 40% of project benefits to flow to **disinvested communities** per SB 535 definitions ensures climate investments address equity alongside resilience

Challenges:

- **Geographic disparities** make equitable distribution of climate-related tourism investments structurally difficult: coastal communities and inland disinvested communities compete for resources with very different baseline capacities to absorb and leverage investment

Symposium of Practice
Tourism & Outdoor Recreation Sector — Project Interview Summary
Southern Border Region – San Diego State University

6

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:

- Larger hotel chains provide **workforce training** that could be models for smaller businesses if structured incentives or requirements are put in place
- Requiring large organizations to **hire locally** could create more durable career pathways and keep wages circulating in the regional economy

Challenges:

- San Diego's **economy is sharply bifurcated** between high-paying R&D jobs requiring advanced degrees and lower-paying tourism and service jobs, with limited pathways connecting the two
- Tourism and recreation jobs are widely **perceived as temporary youth employment** rather than adult careers, despite many workers depending on them as long-term livelihoods, a misperception that shapes both policy and investment
- A significant portion of the service workforce lives in Tijuana and crosses the border daily to work in San Diego hotels at low wages, raising complex questions about **cross-border economic dynamics**
- Many border-crossing workers face **compounding barriers** including limited formal education, language gaps, and soft skills deficits that are not being addressed through current workforce programs

7

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

Symposium of Practice
Tourism & Outdoor Recreation Sector — Project Interview Summary
Southern Border Region – San Diego State University

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 San Diego Arts Council **works closely** with the California Arts Council; a former co-convenor's appointment to the state council strengthens the pipeline between regional and state arts infrastructure
- The collaborative prioritized **activating existing stakeholders**, coalitions, and cultural districts rather than duplicating infrastructure
- **Technical assistance, grant writing training, and active introductions** between organizations were integral to the collaborative's model, improving proposal quality and building long-term organizational sustainability
- The **Prison Arts Project**, managed by SDSU and expanding statewide and nationally, demonstrates the region's capacity to develop high-impact collaborative programs with broad reach
- Encouraging **smaller organizations to team with larger partners** built long-term capacity while improving the competitiveness and impact of Catalyst investments

Challenges:

- No specific challenges were identified

8

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?*

Symposium of Practice
Tourism & Outdoor Recreation Sector — Project Interview Summary
Southern Border Region – San Diego State University

Discussion Points

Opportunities:

- **Cultural districts** provide effective micro-level branding; Barrio Logan's Chicano and Latino identity is a strong model for how distinct neighborhood brands can elevate specific arts and culture communities while contributing to a broader regional narrative
- San Diego functions as a **large county that feels like a collection of small towns**, with strong interpersonal networks that can be leveraged for grassroots brand-building and community storytelling
- **Chula Vista's Gaylord Hotel** represents an innovative approach to competing with downtown San Diego for conferences and events, diversifying the region's meeting and convention identity

Challenges:

- Regional branding remains heavily focused on coastal San Diego, leaving inland communities, East County, and culturally distinct neighborhoods **underrepresented** in the broader identity the region projects
- **Micro-level competition** between cities for tourism attention and dollars drives fragmented individual branding investments rather than a unified regional narrative
- Downtown San Diego's ongoing transition from office and workforce uses to residential raises questions about the **long-term character of the urban core** and what kind of tourism and retail environment it will support