

# Public Lands Advocacy and Local Communities in the San Joaquin Valley



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last few years, public lands in the San Joaquin Valley and throughout the country, have come under increased attack from private interest groups intent on acquiring valuable natural resources. Environmental organizations have worked hard to counter these violations both by advancing policy reforms as well as through organizing efforts. From the policy perspective, they have found strong allies both at the state and national level. However, in appealing to local communities in the San Joaquin Valley for support, they have often received a muted response regarding the fate of federal public lands.

This report examines the existing relationship between local communities in the San Joaquin Valley, public lands in the region, and potential for strengthening advocacy efforts to protect those lands. We base our findings on a regional survey designed to assess out how local communities in the San Joaquin Valley currently relate to and understand public lands. While the survey participants were broadly representative of the San Joaquin Valley population, we oversampled the Latino community given its demographic significance in the region.

Our findings indicate that there are already deep and significant relationships between local community members and our public lands, but much work still remains to be done.

- 92% of respondents reported visiting public lands in the past year.
- Only 5% of respondents said they were “uninterested” in public lands. However, they tend to stay local in their outdoor activities, as economic factors and other structural barriers limit access to further afield public lands for a significant portion of the San Joaquin Valley population—and especially immigrant, Latino, farmworking communities.
- The three major challenges to visiting public lands cited by respondents were time (37%), transportation (28%), and cost (18%). While the surveys demonstrated that many people in the valley visit public lands and have some level of connection to them, the surveys also showed a disconnect from those same community members to public lands advocacy efforts.
- Surprisingly, given the amount of resources and time devoted to mobilizing communities in the valley, 95% of respondents could not identify an organization or group doing public lands advocacy in the region.

Ultimately, we find that broader access along with expanded educational opportunities will enable community members to enjoy – and better advocate for - nearby public lands. We call for decisionmakers to work in tandem with our communities to aggressively pursue new opportunities for conservation and outdoor access programs so that all people have the ability to enjoy our public lands now and into the future.

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## INTRODUCTION

The San Joaquin Valley of California is surrounded by renowned public lands that are visited by millions of people from across the world every year. Some of the country's most impressive national parks and other federal lands, with their amenities and infrastructure, serve these tourists as they pass through the region.

Less recognized however are the needs of local communities who do not access and look for recreational opportunities closer to home. For this reason, our definition of public lands explicitly recognizes not only federal lands, but also those administered by local governments, such as school grounds, sports complexes, and playgrounds. On the valley floor, local residents are often immigrants who work at local industries or in agricultural fields as farmworkers. Days off are often trips to sports fields for soccer matches or visits to nearby pools, rivers or lakes to cool off as well as family trips to Yosemite or Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Parks.

This report seeks to understand the apparent disconnection between public lands advocacy and the San Joaquin Valley communities. Recent threats to the region's public lands—such as the attempt to reduce in size the Giant Sequoia National Monument in 2017—has only heightened this need to bridge and integrate local communities with these special, yet too distant, places of sanctuary. If local community members are not informed and vested in these lands, if they do not access and visit them, then they will remain unmoved to advocate for their continued protection. At the same time, environmental organizations seeking to build local advocacy campaigns need to find new ways to understand and address the needs of local residents, connecting them with society's need to safeguard and conserve ecosystems.

Public lands advocacy can bridge multiple interests while mobilizing diverse communities. Future effective campaigns will organize to increase access and facilitate outings as well as defend and protect *nuestras tierras*, our lands.

## THE QUESTIONS

We surveyed and interviewed local San Joaquin Valley residents about public lands. Our goal was understand what local community residents in the San Joaquin Valley knew about public lands and what type of connections they already had with the public lands in the region. Four basic questions framed the survey:

1. What do local community members know about public lands in general?
2. What type of connections already exist between local communities and nearby public lands?
3. What is creating a disconnection between residents and public lands?
4. What could potentially help create a closer relationship between local community residents and public lands?

While the surveys confirmed some of our suspicions, they also provided some unexpected information that has helped us rethink some of our previous positions.



## THE TEAM

Three organizations worked in collaboration to design and carry out the surveys: Alianza Ecologista del Condado de Tulare, the Central Valley Partnership, and Valley Forward.

### Project Coordinators



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Program Director

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### Outreach Specialists



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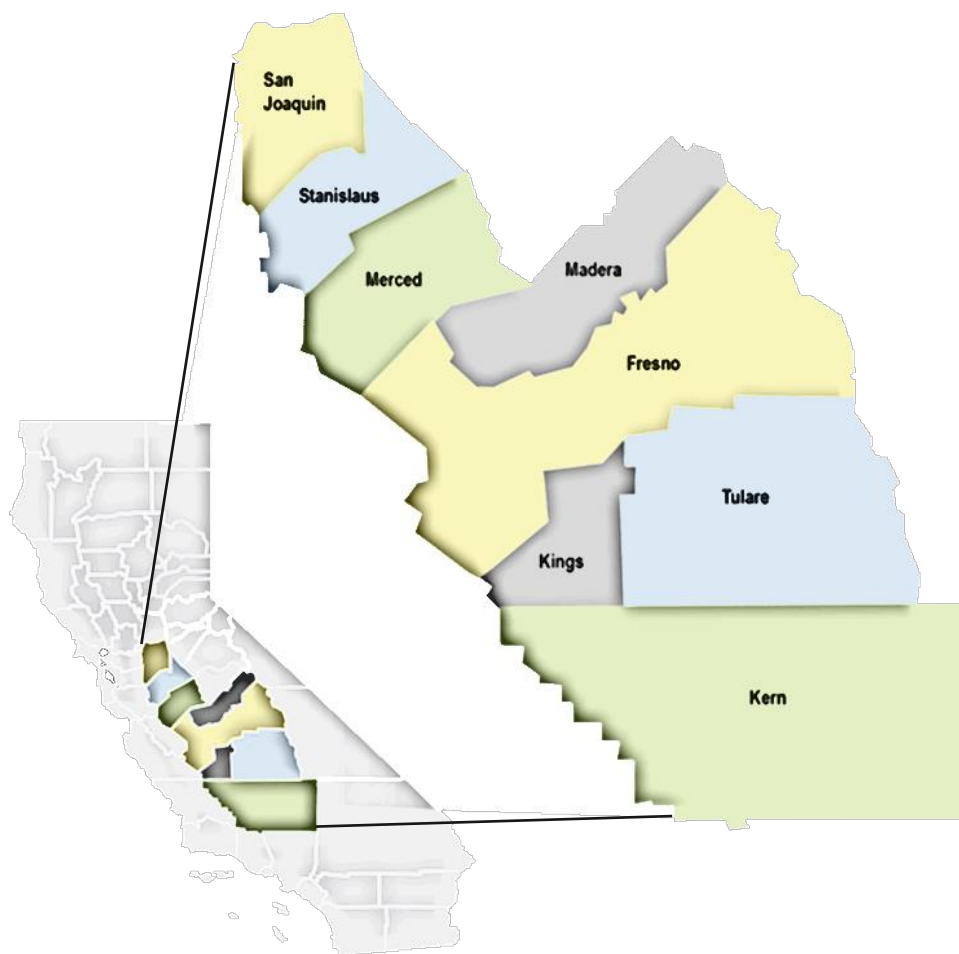
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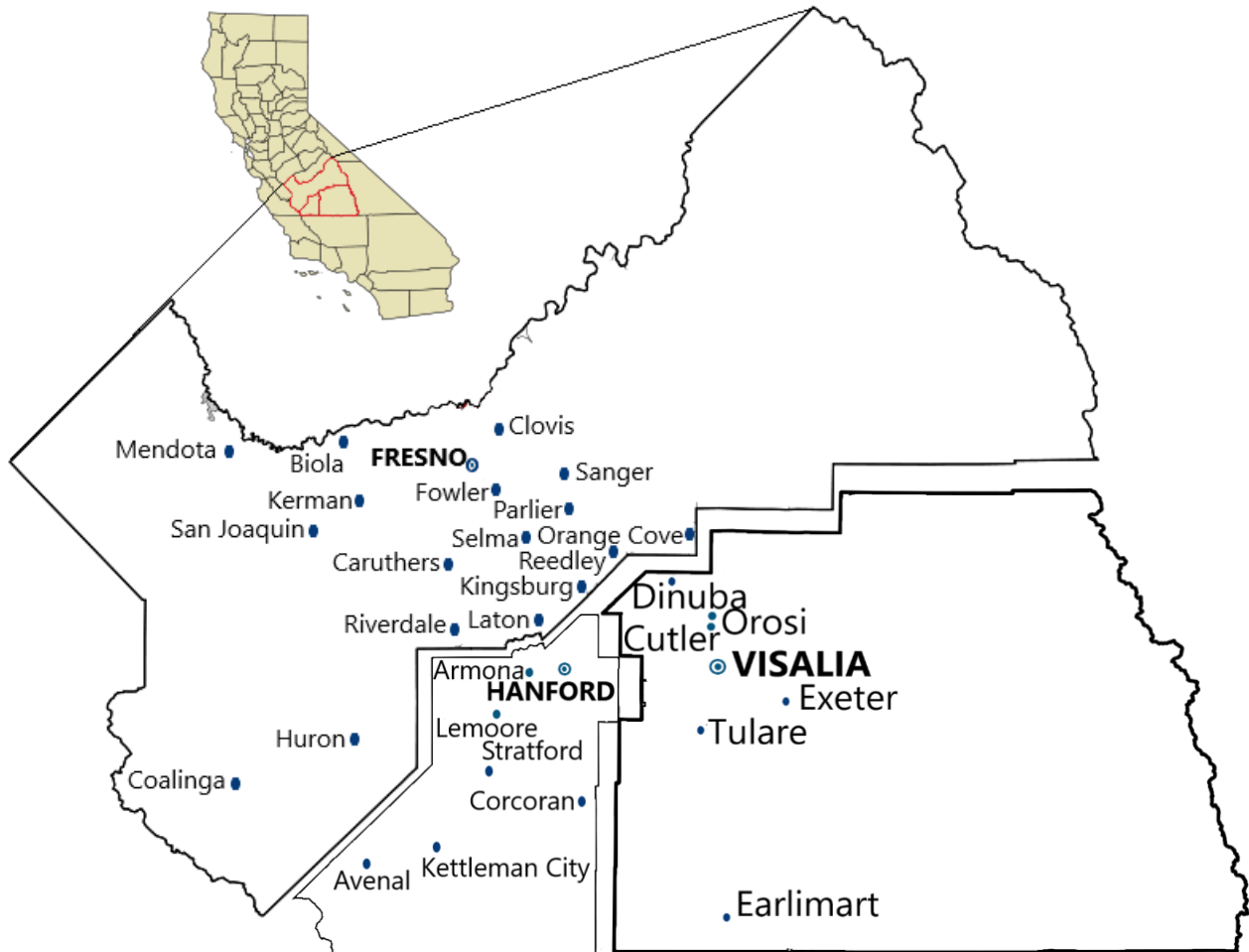
## THE GEOGRAPHY AND DEMOGRAPHICS

- The broader geographic region that the survey encompasses is the San Joaquin Valley. It includes a total of eight counties in the southern part of California's Central Valley, with a total population of 4,266,253 people.\*
- 53% of the total population is classified as Hispanic or Latino (mostly of Mexican ancestry), 31% white, 7% Asian, 5% African American, and 3% American Indian.
- The proportion of the Hispanic or Latino population to the total population in the San Joaquin Valley has increased approximately 5% over the last ten years.



\*Demographic information obtained from US Census Bureau: [www.census.gov/quickfacts](http://www.census.gov/quickfacts).

- Data for the surveys came from more than 30 communities in the Fresno, Kings, and Tulare counties (as shown in the map below), with some from outside this area.

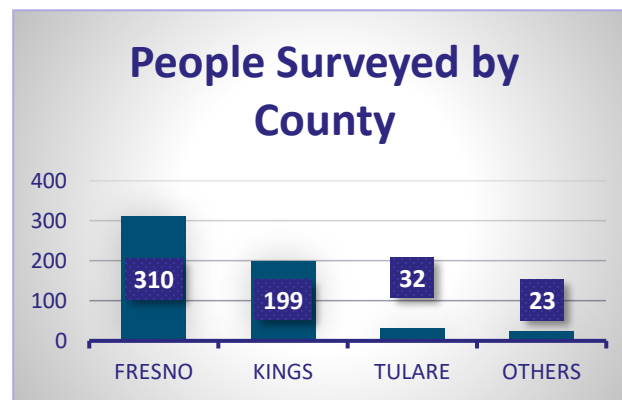


- Fresno County has a population of 999,101 people: 53% are Hispanic or Latino, 27% White, 11% Asian, 5% African American, and 3% American Indian.
- Kings County has a population of 152,940 people: 55% are Hispanic or Latino, 30% White, 7% African American, 4% Asian, and 3% American Indian.
- Tulare County has 466,195 people: 65% are Hispanic or Latino, 25% White, 4% Asian, 3% American Indian, and 2% African American.

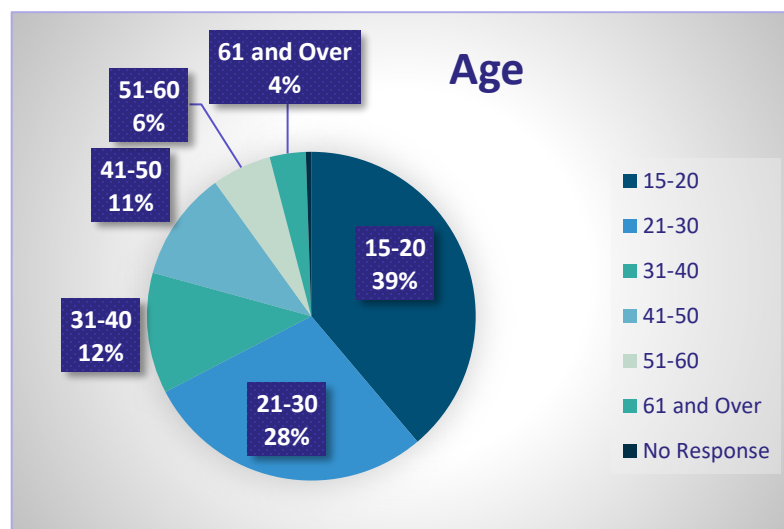


## THE SURVEYS

- The surveys were administered by outreach specialists from the youth leadership organization Valley Forward, based in the city of Fresno.
- The surveys were conducted in the months of January and February 2020 in the neighboring counties of Fresno, Kings, and Tulare. The surveys included residents from small, unincorporated communities, also known as Census-Designated Places, with a few thousand people, such as Riverdale, Laton, Earlimart, and Orosi, as well as big cities like Fresno and Visalia, with over 100,000 residents.



- A total of 564 respondents between the ages of 15 and 77 years old answered the survey questions. The respondents tended to be predominantly young (67% were under the age of 30).

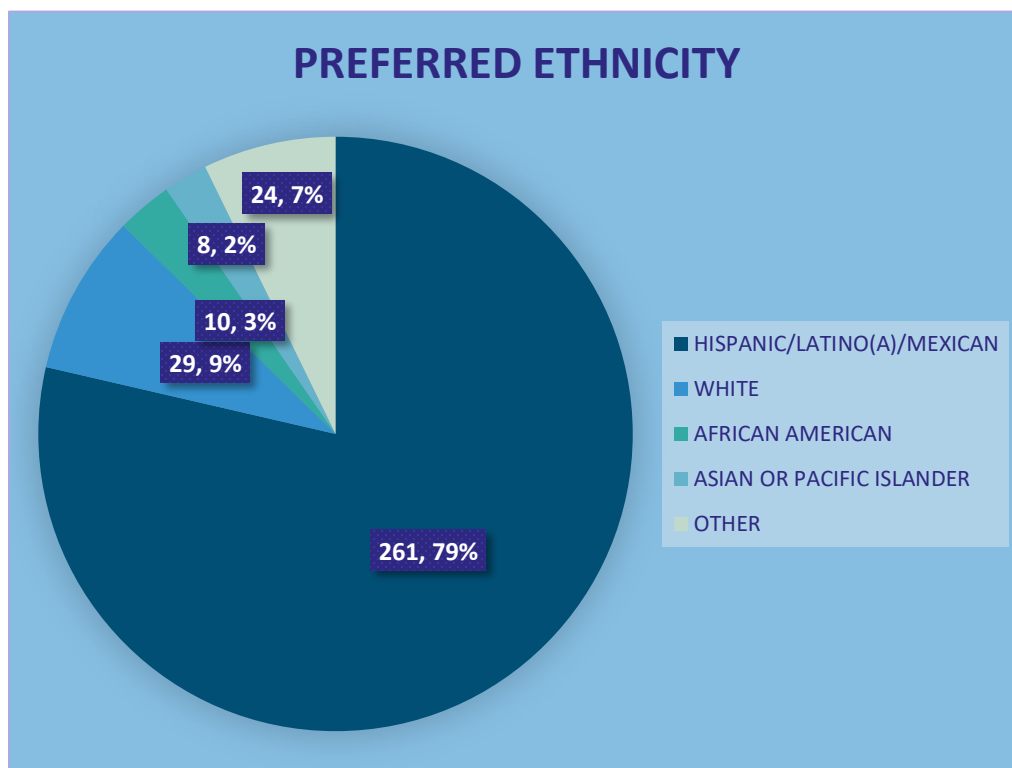


- The surveys were conducted in the two most broadly spoken languages in the region: English and Spanish. The vast majority of the respondents did the survey in English (83%), but some also did it in Spanish (17%), especially some of the older participants.
- The surveys were conducted in college campuses, like Fresno City College and West Hills Community College in Lemoore; flea markets (also known as *remates* regionally) in cities like Fresno and Selma; and at other social and cultural events.



- These events and locations were selected to access as broad a sector of the population as possible. Especially important in our considerations was reaching out to the immigrant, farmworking, Spanish-speaking, Latino community.

- In particular, flea markets were essential to reach older, Spanish-language monolingual speakers. Sandra Villalobos, one of the outreach specialists taking the surveys, stated that when they visited the Fresno and Selma flea markets “most of the participants were Spanish speakers and older than 29 years old,” a demographic that is often difficult to reach.
- The survey was conducted with the Latino community in mind, but other groups were represented as well. The Latino community was of particular interest given that in the region this group constitutes a significant portion of the population (53% in Fresno, 55% in Kings Counties, and 65% in Tulare County), but is often underrepresented, or excluded, in public lands advocacy efforts.
- Approximately half of the respondents were asked to state their preferred ethnicity, and the overwhelming majority identified as Hispanic, Latino(a), and/or Mexican. While the Latino community was emphasized in survey outreach, responses covered the broad diversity and demographic breadth of the region.



## THE CONCEPT OF “PUBLIC LANDS”

“In my experience I found that many of the community members don’t quite understand what public lands entails, especially when talking to the Spanish speaking community. Finding a proper translation for ‘public lands’ was a challenge of its own.”

**Marthalia Gonzalez-Felix, Outreach Specialist**

- One important question in the surveys was to get an idea of what people thought about public lands and how familiar they were with the concept.
- While to many people the concept of public lands is well known, it is not necessarily the case with many of the local communities in the Central Valley, constituted in large part, as they are, of immigrant, farmworking families.
- In fact, a common experience from the outreach specialists taking the surveys was that people simply did not know what the term referred to. For example, Brenda Cabrera stated that “The majority of the people in areas like Selma, Sanger, and Parlier had no knowledge of the term ‘public lands’ until we would rephrase the word with something simpler like lakes, rivers, or national parks.” Without this language clarification, the number of “Don’t Know” responses would have been much higher.
- Residents associated public lands with features and venues they often visited, even though some were not technically government owned.

| <b>Idea of Public Lands</b>   | <b>Total Responses</b> | <b>Percent</b> |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| National Parks and Forests    | 381                    | 68%            |
| Lakes and Rivers              | 266                    | 47%            |
| Sports Fields and Playgrounds | 261                    | 46%            |
| Government Buildings          | 122                    | 22%            |
| Churches                      | 114                    | 20%            |
| Don’t Know                    | 114                    | 20%            |

- In the survey, as could be expected, most respondents associated public lands with national parks and forests (68%). The next one was lakes and rivers (47%), and then sports fields and playgrounds (46%).
- Some people also identified public lands with government buildings (22%) and even churches (20%).
- Just as significant, 114 respondents, or 20% of the total, didn't know what public lands were.
- The results point to an important role that local organizations focused on public lands advocacy can play. There is a need to provide basic information that educates local communities as to what public lands are and their opportunities for outdoor access.



## THE CONNECTION

“The most common trend that we observed based on the responses was that most people have visited a lake or river at least once within the past 5 years”

**Brenda Cabrera, Outreach Specialist**

- This project started with the goal of assessing the connection between local communities in the San Joaquin Valley—especially the Latino community—and public lands.
- To get an idea of how closely connected people in the region are to public lands, we asked survey participants what public lands they had visited in the previous year (respondents could select more than one option).

| <b>Public Lands Visited</b>           | <b>Total Responses</b> | <b>Percent</b> |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| Lakes and Rivers                      | 284                    | 50%            |
| Sports Fields and Playgrounds         | 220                    | 39%            |
| Yosemite National Park                | 209                    | 37%            |
| Sequoia National Park/Forest/Monument | 173                    | 31%            |
| Kings National Park                   | 75                     | 13%            |
| None                                  | 44                     | 8%             |
| Sierra National Forest                | 1                      | 1%             |

- As anybody that lives in the area would expect, the number one response was lakes and rivers (50%). Many people’s experiences with public lands are linked to aquatic areas of recreation, especially those closer to their communities: Lake Kaweah for Fresno County and Lake Success for Tulare County, both managed by the US Army Corps of Engineers. These lakes provide a space to cool down during the hot summer months that regularly surpass 100 degrees Fahrenheit in the Valley.



- However, river access is limited due to insufficient parking areas. This is an example of how inadequate infrastructure restricts access for local residents to highly valued public lands.
- The next most visited public lands were local sports fields and playgrounds (39%). We believe that this number is low relative to what is likely the closest outdoor space for most of our respondents. Many communities do not have adequate, accessible local parks – an advocacy issue that is gaining prominence after a recent initiative in the City of Fresno was placed on the ballot by resident organizing and action.
- After those more easily accessible local areas, respondents then identified the federally managed public lands including national parks, forests, and monuments. As many as 37% of residents were familiar with these public lands and have recently visited them.
- Finally, and just as significantly, only 44 (or 8%), replied that they had visited no public lands in the last year. It is clear that communities, despite challenges, are visiting public lands.

## CHALLENGES TO VISITING PUBLIC LANDS

“Out of these participants, one common trend that I noticed was that most people simply did not have enough free time to visit public lands. Most of these individuals stated that they work long hours and take care of young children”

**Sandra Villalobos, Outreach Specialist**

- Local communities face many challenges in accessing public lands, and especially so with the federally-managed lands in the region. Our goal with this question was to determine what the major factors that limited people’s access to public lands were.

| Challenges              | Total Responses | Percent |
|-------------------------|-----------------|---------|
| Time                    | 208             | 37%     |
| Transportation          | 157             | 28%     |
| Cost                    | 104             | 18%     |
| Unaware of Public Lands | 49              | 9%      |
| Other                   | 30              | 5%      |
| Not Interested          | 26              | 5%      |

- The three major challenges to visiting public lands cited by respondents were time (37%), transportation (28%), and cost (18%).
- “Time” referred both to the time it takes to get to the public lands as well as to having free time to make the trip. While younger people may be busy with school, older people, especially those working in the fields, work long hours, which often includes Saturdays and Sundays as well.

**Rosa C.**, a 30-year-old Kerman resident, stated that what would make it easier for her to visit public lands would be: “Finding the time out of a busy work and personal schedule.”

**Ariana V.**, 27-year-old Parlier resident exclaimed: “Unfortunately, due to work and time we are unable to visit public lands.”



- Transportation was another major challenge. This most likely referred both to having a form of transportation (a car, for instance) as to the actual distance that has to be driven and knowing where to go and how to get there.

**Jasmine O.**, 18-year-old Hanford resident said that having “A fixed and affordable mode of transportation” would make the difference for her.

- Others noted a lack of knowledge of public lands.

**Jacqueline F.**, 23-year-old Fresno resident, simply said that what would make it more likely for her to visit public lands would be to “know where they are located.”

- Significantly, only 5% of respondents said they were “uninterested” in visiting public lands.
- Interestingly, safety was not a significant factor, only 2 respondents mentioned safety as a factor.
- However, one common complaint was lack of facilities, such as parking and restrooms, as well as proper maintenance.

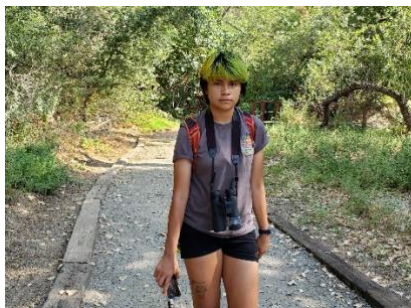
**Karla A.**, 21-year-old Parlier resident simply said: “If some were cleaner, I would like to take my nieces with me.”

**Maria L.**, 34-year-old Parlier resident, stated that having “cleaner lakes and restrooms” was needed.

## PREFERRED ACTIVITIES

| Preferred Activities               | Total Responses | Percent |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|---------|
| Hiking                             | 274             | 49%     |
| Camping                            | 239             | 42%     |
| Celebrations                       | 211             | 37%     |
| Sports and Recreational Activities | 210             | 37%     |
| Wildlife                           | 172             | 30%     |
| Nature Exploration                 | 39              | 7%      |
| Don't Go                           | 32              | 6%      |
| Fishing                            | 8               | 1.5%    |
| Family Trips                       | 3               | 1%      |

- The purpose of this question was to learn what activities were most practiced and/or preferred by community members and the ways in which they are already engaged with public lands.
- The two most-mentioned activities were hiking (49%) and camping (42%), which we interpret as expressions of associated interest as well as actual outdoor activity. Activities favoring wildlife (30%) and nature exploration (7%) similarly point to possibilities and opportunities to structured culturally appropriate outings that bring residents to public lands.
- The next answers were celebrations, and sports and recreational activities. We know that these are significant ways that local residents, and especially the Latino community, engage with public lands, both based on personal experience as well as observation, and confirmed by the responses.



## ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

- One key question in the survey asked the respondents to name a group or organization that they know that advocates for public lands.

| <b>Groups Advocating for Public Lands</b> | <b>Total Responses</b> | <b>Percent</b> |
|---|------------------------|----------------|
| Don't Know Any                            | 481                    | 84%            |
| Valley Forward                            | 35                     | 6%             |
| Other                                     | 38                     | 4%             |
| Sierra Club                               | 10                     | 2%             |
| Forest Service                            | 6                      | 1%             |

- Overall, 95% of respondents could not identify a single organization or group doing public lands advocacy in the region.
- An overwhelming majority (84%) simply said they did not know any organizations doing public lands advocacy.
- The only environmental group that was known by more than one respondent was the Sierra Club (10, or 2%). No other environmental group in the region was mentioned more than once.
- Some groups, such as Valley Forward, who conducted the surveys, were mentioned by respondents assuming that that was their role, although their focus is on social and political issues rather than public lands advocacy. Similarly, some respondents mentioned groups like Mi Familia Vota (My Family Votes), a group with a focus on civic engagement and voter participation.
- Others mentioned churches, the forest service, the Environmental Protection Agency, and even indigenous peoples generically.
- Clearly, much work is needed to create a stronger connection between environmental groups and local communities in the San Joaquin Valley.

## CONCLUSIONS

- One key conclusion from the surveys is that local communities in the San Joaquin Valley are already connected to public lands in a consistent manner.
- Community members know the regional national parks and forests, and engage in recreational activities in these places.
- However, just as significantly, it is also clear that engagement does not necessarily translate to advocacy, at least not as expressed by involvement with environmental organizations.
- Broader access is still necessary, along with more educational opportunities, to help community members enjoy our public lands.
- Responses provided in the surveys suggest strategies that can be implemented to bring more community members to visit public lands and to engage with them in more meaningful ways, as discussed in our Call to Action below.



## CALL TO ACTION

The San Joaquin Valley has a history of powerful public lands advocacy. It is time to reignite this work, align it with the current residents' needs and concerns, and build a new generation of people who love the mountains, watersheds, agricultural landscapes, and local public spaces. We need our decisionmakers to work in tandem with our communities to aggressively pursue new opportunities for conservation and outdoor access programs so that all people have the ability to enjoy our public lands.

Though no longer well remembered, over a century ago the fight to conserve the giant sequoias was led by the *Visalia Delta* newspaper together with local farmers and concerned residents on the valley floor. More recently, only a generation ago, local residents pushed back and stopped the development of a ski resort in Mineral King; and in recent years, valley constituents successfully halted the development of Yokohl Valley in Tulare County.

Local public lands advocacy, though emergent and nascent, continues today. This report coincides with these current efforts. We recognize the need for further, more comprehensive research and on-the-ground programs to catalyze and propel future campaigns that align with the cultural richness, new demographic trends, and present needs of the region's highly diverse communities of today. Illustrating the interest of local residents from our survey, 46% of respondents agreed to be contacted and included in future public lands research and outreach.

A theoretical framework for public lands advocacy emerges from the report's surveys and recent programs to bring local residents to public lands. It suggests building a strong public lands movement in the San Joaquin Valley by incorporating all members of local communities. We have found that Latino residents, while constituting a significant portion of the total population (in some of the unincorporated communities accounting for as much as 90% of the population, but on average between 50% and 60%), are not disconnected from the broader population, but rather, are integrated and incorporated in many complex ways. Thus, an "integrational approach" will look to tap into those existing relationships to incorporate all groups into public lands use and

public lands advocacy. Such an approach calls for a broad coalition of local, regional, state, and national-level organizations working on environmental, social justice, and other issues to work collaboratively, bringing forward their particular expertise and skill sets to effectively address the multi-layered challenges that public lands face in the San Joaquin Valley and beyond.

The diversity of our communities mirrors the richness of our environment. Local communities harbor valuable experiences and knowledge. An approach to integrate and bring together people of different ages (kids, teenagers, adults, and elders), different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and different levels of experience and knowledge about public lands, nature and the environment, holds promise to tap local reservoirs of capacity, problem-solving, and wisdom.

Conservation cannot serve an elite few if it hopes to be relevant, pertinent, and meaningful to the local immigrant communities of the San Joaquin Valley. Overcoming barriers to access and reconnecting local people to their public lands is a place to start in rekindling and sustaining public lands advocacy in the region today. The power of movements is founded upon connection with the land and to each other.

