



# LOWER OWENS RIVER RECREATION USE PLAN

Prepared for Inyo County

Prepared by:



DRAFT PLAN  
January 15, 2013



# acknowledgements

## A SPECIAL THANKS TO:

Boulder Creek RV Resort  
California Department of Transportation (Caltrans)  
Eastern California Museum  
Interagency Visitors Center  
Inyo County Board of Supervisors  
Inyo County Planning Department  
Inyo County Public Works  
Inyo County Water Department  
Lone Pine Chamber of Commerce  
Los Angeles Department of Water & Power watershed staff  
Owens Valley Unified School District  
Ranchers of the Lower Owens Valley  
Tribes of the Owens Valley

Additionally, input gathered from residents of Inyo County, area fishing and hunting enthusiasts, conservationists, civic leaders and environmental educators was instrumental in formation of this plan document.





# table of contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	i
<b>1.0 INTRODUCTION</b>	
1.1 Lower Owens River Project .....	1
1.2 Purpose of the Recreation Use Plan .....	2
1.3 Planning Background .....	4
1.4 Participatory Planning Process .....	7
<b>2.0 EXISTING CONDITIONS</b>	
2.1 Natural Setting and In-Stream Conditions .....	11
2.2 Existing Recreation Activities .....	13
2.3 Recreation Use Levels and Future Potential .....	17
<b>3.0 PREFERRED CONCEPT FOR ENHANCED RECREATION</b>	
3.1 Recreation Use Plan Goals and Directions .....	21
3.2 Recreation Enhancements and Amenities .....	29
<b>4.0 PLAN IMPLEMENTATION AND AREA MANAGEMENT</b>	
4.1 Community Perspective on Lower Owens River Management .....	41
4.2 Lower Owens River Management Principles .....	46
4.3 Environmental Review and Design .....	46
REFERENCES.....	49
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
A: Community Involvement Findings	
B: August 2012 Charette Summary Memo	
C: LORP Existing Conditions Memo	
D: LORP Recreation Use Plan, High Level Environmental Review	



# executive summary

The Lower Owens River Project is one of the largest river ecosystem restoration projects in the nation, encompassing 77,657 acres of high desert land located between the Sierra Nevada and Inyo Mountains in east-central California. The return of a consistent flow of water to the Lower Owens River since 2005 has created new opportunities to enhance and better manage community and visitor recreation experiences, within a context of ecosystem recovery. To accomplish this, Inyo County has led the development of this Draft Recreation Use Plan for the Lower Owens River.

Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP), local residents, tribes, and many stakeholders have contributed to the ideas in this plan by taking part in a variety of activities, including interviews and community workshops. An online questionnaire allowed for participation by those who could not attend interviews or workshops. An important goal of public involvement was to try, as much as possible, to match the plan's goals and recommendations with the vision and priorities of community members who will be most affected by the outcome. The public involvement process and results are described in this document and in Appendices A and B.

Why plan for recreation use? Primarily, this plan is needed to minimize conflicts between recreation users, natural resource conservation, cultural resource protection, water facility operations, and ranching. By directing recreation users to lower impact areas, and by establishing rules and responsibilities, this plan allows the community and tourists to enjoy a beautiful and abundant resource while minimizing.

This plan was selected for further development after considering three alternative levels of recreation use. It envisions a natural, low key approach to recreation use and facilities consistent with conservation goals of the Lower Owens River Project area.

Key goals for this recreation plan are:

- Strengthen the tourist economy of local communities
- Enhance user opportunities for low impact exploration
- Improve access and wayfinding
- Strategically improve river and lake access for fishing, canoeing and kayaking
- Inspire cultural and environmental education, learning and stewardship

To achieve these goals, the plan incorporates the following facilities and ideas:

- Signs along Highway 395 directing people into the recreation area
- Strategically located staging and orientation areas for users
- A multi-use Lower Owens River Trail running most of the length of the river
- Birding/wildlife viewing trails with rustic blinds
- A possible boardwalk trail in the Delta area
- Spot improvements to roads to facilitate recreation users
- Improved River access, including put-in and take-out points and marked water
- trails for non-motorized boating, and improved fishing access in selected areas.
- Wayfinding signage to support users unfamiliar with the area and to direct people to low impact areas and away from potential conflicts
- Installation of additional cattle guards and gates to reduce conflicts with ranching operations
- Virtual interpretation through use of “quick response” codes or other electronic linkages that tell stories about the Lower Owens River

Fishing and hunting will continue as dispersed uses not limited to any specific area, and will remain subject to California Department of Fish and Game regulations. Interpretive amenities that bring focus to local culture, history and environment, and particularly the creation of an interpretive center focused on the story of the Lower Owens River in Independence, could complement other recreation use.

In addition to recreation use and facility recommendations, potential management and operations strategies are included, along with cost estimates for implementation.

Funding for this plan has been provided by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy. The County Board of Supervisors and the land owner, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, have the ultimate responsibility to approve and oversee implementation and management. Final plan adoption and implementation will be contingent on a satisfactory environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act.



# 1 introduction

Inyo County has created the Lower Owens River Recreation Use Plan to enhance and better manage community and visitor recreation experiences. Initiated in Summer 2010, this long-range plan provides direction and guidance for the continued investment and collaboration needed to establish the Lower Owens River as a recreation destination for local and regional outdoor enthusiasts. It presents a preferred level of recreation development for Inyo County and Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) to advance together in collaboration with key partners.

Funding for development of the Lower Owens River Recreation Use Plan has been provided by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, a California State agency. The Conservancy supports efforts that improve the environmental, economic and social well-being of the Sierra Nevada Region.

## 1.1 LOWER OWENS RIVER PROJECT

The Lower Owens River Project (LORP) is one of the largest river ecosystem restoration efforts in the nation, affecting 77,657 acres of high desert land in Inyo County, California. The LORP area includes over 62 miles of sinuous river, more than 1,500 acres of wetlands, and numerous off-river lakes and ponds. It includes the area on both sides of the Owens River, near the towns of Lone Pine and Independence, between the Los Angeles Aqueduct intake to the north and the Owens Dry Lake to the south. The land is owned by the City of Los Angeles and managed by LADWP.

The Lower Owens River was substantially de-watered in 1913 when its flow was diverted to the Los Angeles Aqueduct to augment Los Angeles' water supply. A long process of multi-party negotiations and litigation resulted in a series of agreements to return flow to the river to meet fish and riparian needs. For many years prior to 2006, LADWP maintained off-river lakes and ponds through their watershed management practices. However, the return of a consistent flow of water to the river (since 2006) has opened new opportunities for both habitat conservation and recreation.





*The area near Lone Pine near the old railroad trestle provides good river access.*

The decision to create a recreation plan for the Lower Owens River is a direct outgrowth of a 1997 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Inyo County and LADWP, which states:

*The goal of the LORP is the establishment of a healthy, functioning Lower Owens River riverine-riparian ecosystem, and the establishment of healthy functioning ecosystems in the other elements of the LORP, for the benefit of biodiversity and threatened and endangered species, while providing for the continuation of sustainable uses including recreation, livestock grazing, agriculture, and other activities.*

## 1.2 PURPOSE OF THE RECREATION USE PLAN

The Lower Owens River Project (LORP) area includes ecologically sensitive lands and wildlife habitat that are in early stages of recovery. Ecological issues are complex and still evolving as the Lower Owens River and its associated riparian and wetland ecosystems adapt to an increased flow of water. Cultural resource protection, natural resource conservation, ecosystem recovery, and the continuing productivity of ranching lands and the LORP “working landscape”, remain essential priorities for area managers.



*Blackrock Wetlands is a popular birding and fishing area.*

The purpose of this Recreation Use Plan is to support LORP goals while creating opportunities for local residents and visitors to experience recreation, learn more about the ecosystem, and become active stewards of the Lower Owens River. This document provides a conceptual framework intended to help protect the area from the unintended consequences of growing use in the absence of a common, balanced recreation vision and management strategy. More specifically, the Plan:

- Defines a recreation vision and community goals for providing ecologically-appropriate recreation opportunities on the Lower Owens River;
- Presents a preferred concept for future recreation development; and
- Addresses feasibility of plan implementation at a high level, including key management considerations, preliminary costs, and discussion of needed environmental analysis in the event of specific project development and implementation.

The Lower Owens River Project is guided by the following objectives:

1. Establishment and maintenance of diverse riverine, riparian, and wetland habitats in a healthy ecological condition.
2. Compliance with state and federal laws (including regulations adopted pursuant to such laws) that protect Threatened and Endangered Species.
3. Management consistent with applicable water quality laws, standards, and objectives.
4. Control of deleterious species whose presence within the Planning Area interferes with the achievement of the goals of the LORP. These control measures will be implemented jointly with other responsible agency programs.
5. Management of livestock.



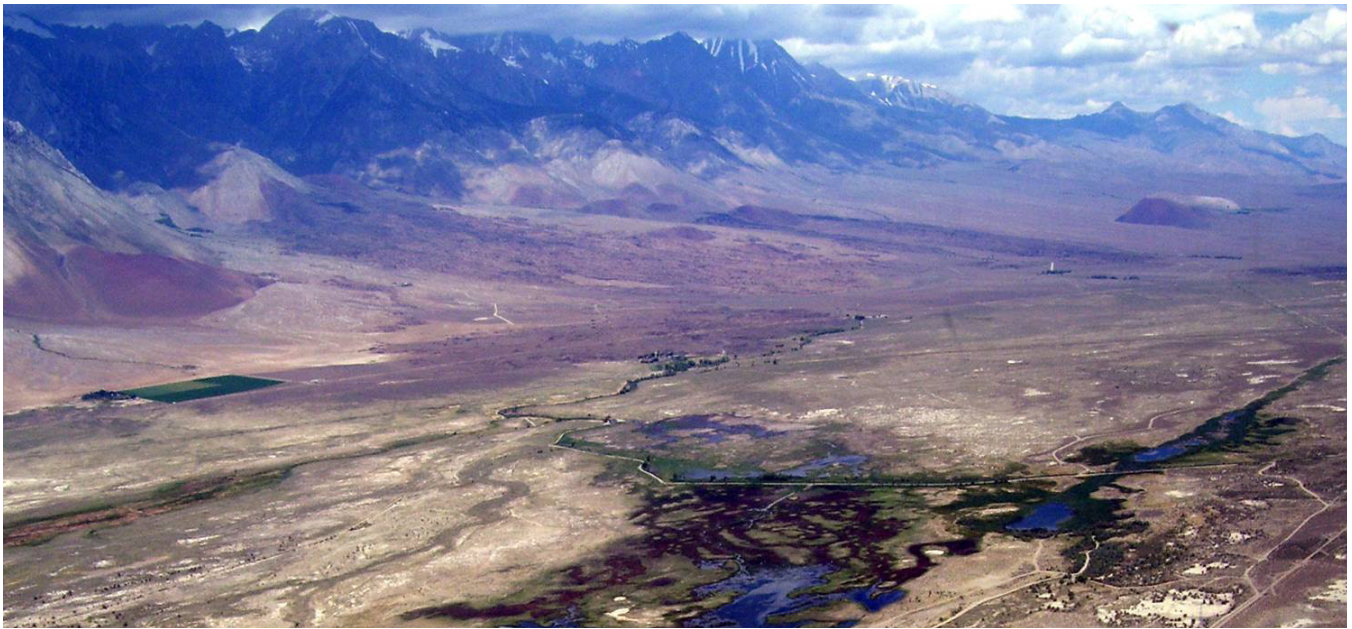


*The May 2011 public workshop in Independence generated many good ideas.*

### 1.3 PLANNING BACKGROUND

Over the past two decades, a policy framework for recreation use and management has emerged via a series of planning processes, negotiations, and related guiding documents. The Lower Owens River Recreation Use Plan is intended to be consistent with the directions provided in these documents:

- *1991 Long Term Water Agreement*: This agreement called for LADWP to help fund rehabilitation and new development of County-managed recreation facilities on City-owned land (including day use and camping areas) as well as a recreational use plan for the Owens River. Some funding for operations and maintenance was also to be included. To date, this funding has been spent in its entirety on County recreation projects exclusive of the Recreation Use Plan.
- *1997 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)*: This guiding document includes recreation as a goal or benefit of the overall project to restore the river. It states that recreation use must be compatible with other LORP goals, particularly ecosystem improvement and recovery. A warm water recreational fishery is called out as a key goal of the project.
- *LORP Ecosystem Management Plan*: This document addresses potential conflicts between ecosystem recovery and recreation, and between ecosystem recovery and aqueduct and ranching operations, by stating that recreation must not negatively impact the natural ecosystem or working landscape. It calls for recreation management including seasonal closures and other methods to prevent and reduce conflicts. It does not call for the development of any specific recreation facilities.



*This view of the upper part of the Lower Owens River includes the beginning of the Los Angeles Aqueduct.*

- *Framework for the Recreation Plan: Technical Memo #10:* This joint project of LADWP and Inyo County identified recreation use patterns prior to river re-watering, issues of concern, constraints and opportunities. The memo includes case study examples of other large natural area recreation issues, and presents some general ideas for types of recreation suited for the Lower Owens River. It does not propose any specific recreation facilities or uses.
- *LORP Monitoring, Adaptive Management and Reporting Plan:* The LORP Monitoring Report includes a brief section on recreation that describes the primary current recreation use as fishing and notes that overnight camping is prohibited. LADWP expects an increase in recreation use, particularly wildlife viewing, bird watching, hunting and fishing over the next 10 to 15 years, and expresses concerns about damage to natural resources.
- *LORP Final Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Impact Statement (EIR/EIS):* This document introduced strategies to mitigate impacts to livestock operations resulting from increased recreation, including but not limited to installation of fences and cattle guards, and signage requesting that recreation users keep cattle gates closed. It also called for the installation of signage and fencing with pass-throughs by LADWP, which were implemented in 2010. Six kiosks were installed to help orient recreation users and establish use rules. The fence pass-throughs allow foot access to the river, primarily for fishing. No additional pass-throughs are planned at this time, but access may be modified if necessary.





*Ranchers have leased most of the Lower Owens River Project area for decades.*

- *LORP Post-Implementation Plan:* This document describes how LADWP and the County will divide financial costs of administering the LORP. It includes language describing the funding of recreational improvements within the LORP.
- *Inyo County General Plan Goals & Policies Report:* This document includes a number of policies that apply to planning in the Lower Owens River region, listed below. Elements of this plan may not necessarily be compatible with LADWP's land management plan.
  - Policy ED - 1.2: The County shall encourage public agencies to develop new tourist serving facilities or otherwise enhance their capacity to serve visitors on the public lands they manage.
  - Policy ED - 1.3: Encourage the LADWP to continue to allow and expand the recreational uses of their land holdings in the Owens Valley.
  - Policy BT - 1.2: Plan for and provide a continuous and easily accessible bikeway and trail system within the region.
  - Policy REC - 1.1: Encourage the use of the natural environment for passive recreational opportunities.
  - Policy REC - 1.2: Encourage the continued management of existing recreational areas and open space, and appropriate expansion of new recreational opportunities on federal, state, and LADWP lands.
  - Recreation Implementation Measure 1.0: Work with federal and state agencies that manage land with Inyo County to ensure that appropriate access to open space and recreational areas is provided.





*This portion of the Lower Owens River is an example of structurally complex habitat.*

- Recreation Implementation Measure 2.0: Work with the LADWP to fully take advantage of the recreational opportunities associated with the Lower Owens River Restoration Project.
- Recreation Implementation Measure 9.0: Work with federal land management agencies and LADWP to coordinate trail efforts and ensure connections between trail systems in federally managed lands and Inyo County communities and locations of interest.

## 1.4 PARTICIPATORY PLANNING PROCESS

The input and direction of community participants, and the management priorities of the County, LADWP and other relevant agencies, provide the foundation for this plan. Beginning in Summer 2010, County staff and the County Board of Supervisors worked with the community to develop a concept for enhancing recreation experiences along the Lower Owens River, conducting a variety of public involvement activities in order to match the Plan's goals and direction with the vision and priorities of key stakeholders and the surrounding community.

The project team conducted interviews and attended and hosted a number of local meetings to gain an understanding of the key planning issues from a local perspective. In December 2010, Team members met with more than 30 community representatives. In May 2011, Inyo County hosted two public workshops in Lone Pine and Independence to explore issues and recreation opportunities for the Recreation Use Plan. To expand project participation, an online questionnaire was made available for several months after the workshops.



*The May 2011 workshops were held in both Independence and Lone Pine.*

The [www.lowerowensriver.org](http://www.lowerowensriver.org) website provided information and updates on the planning process. More than 100 stakeholders, including ranchers, hunters, anglers, birders and kayakers, were contacted and consulted during development of this plan. Many participated in meetings, workshops and charrettes. Tribal governments and other representatives or staff were also consulted and participated in developing this plan.

The preferred concept for recreation, presented in Chapter 3, is the result of a comprehensive and collaborative assessment of three alternative levels of recreation use and investment, and reflects the priorities of participating community members outlined on the following page.

For additional information on the participatory planning process, refer to Appendix A: Community Involvement Findings and Appendix B: August 2012 Charrette Summary Memo.



*Community and consultants discuss the Lower Owens River Recreation Use Plan at the May 2011 workshop.*

## COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

While the community interviews, workshops, questionnaire results, and rolling charrette revealed a wide range of interests and concerns, participating community members agreed and/or continued to express that future recreation development and management should address the following:

- The economic development potential associated with expanding and enhancing outdoor recreation as a desired and actual use;
- Public information, signage, and outreach around recreation area opportunities, policies and restrictions;
- Area access and wayfinding for multiple users and activities;
- The need to minimize impacts of area visitors and recreation uses on ranching operations and privately managed lands;
- Protection of Native American cultural resources and areas;
- Support for environmental learning, programs and stewardship; and
- Tule growth and its impact on in-stream recreation access and the local ecosystem.





# 2 existing conditions

This chapter describes the Lower Owens River natural environment and current recreation activities in the context of this landscape. Current recreation use levels, with an eye towards potential changes in use levels, are briefly explored. For additional information, please refer to Appendix C: LORP Existing Conditions Memo.

## 2.1 NATURAL SETTING AND IN-STREAM CONDITIONS

The Lower Owens River area is a flat to gently sloping, mid-elevation, north-south valley flanked by two of the highest mountain ranges in North America: the Inyo-White Mountains on the east and the Sierra Nevada on the west. The elevation of the Lower Owens River Valley ranges from a low of 3,620 feet at the Owens River Delta at Owens Lake to a high of 3,820 feet at the Los Angeles Aqueduct (LA Aqueduct) Intake. The bordering mountain peaks rise to more than 14,000 feet and include Mt. Whitney, the highest peak in the lower 48 states.

Several seasonal creeks flow from the Sierra into the valley. While some of these creeks disappear into the ground, others are conveyed to the LA Aqueduct. The Inyo Mountains, which are much dryer than the Sierras, have no creeks that flow into the Lower Owens River.

The Owens River ends at Owens Lake, a salt playa that is now mostly dry. Because of the water diversion to the aqueduct, the river itself ran mostly dry from 1913 until 2006, when a minimum, consistent flow of 40 cubic feet per second (cfs) was established, along with annual seasonal habitat flows up to 200 cfs, dependent on forecast runoff from snowmelt. These seasonal flows are meant to inundate floodplain landforms to establish riparian vegetation.

The majority of the LORP area is characterized by dry uplands with a range of desert shrubs and grasses. Most of this area is grazed by cattle and riparian pastures are fenced. The dominant vegetation of the valley floor is a mix of alkali scrub and grassy meadow. Riverine-riparian trees and shrubs are taking root along the river as the shallow water table rises and





*The Delta Wetlands provide important habitat for waterfowl and birdwatching opportunities.*

gradually spreads laterally. This riparian area covers about 6,500 acres, or 8 percent of the total LORP area.

A series of constructed and managed wetlands occur within the approximately 1500-acre Blackrock Waterfowl Management Area (WMA) in the northwest end of the LORP. Water levels are adjusted seasonally to maintain key habitats, particularly for waterfowl.

The Delta Habitat Area encompasses approximately 900 acres where the river meets the northern part of Owens Lake, forming a series of wetlands and shallow pools of water. The Delta wetlands are key habitats for wading and shorebirds, and are reportedly becoming a popular area for bird watching.

A series of off-river lakes and ponds occur along a fault line as a result of a massive 1872 earthquake. They include popular fishing areas, such as Lower Twin Lakes, the Coyote/Grass Lakes complex, Upper and Lower Goose Lakes and Billy Lake. These lie mostly within the Blackrock WMA.

There are few mature stands of trees in the LORP. A few groves of Fremont cottonwood and willows near the river grow up to about 40 feet in height. The open landscape character of the LORP permits outstanding, mostly uninterrupted views of the surrounding mountains, but also provides little shade during the hot summer months. Along margins of the river, ponds, wetlands, and tall, dense bullrushes and cattails limit mountain views for water users.



*Tule growth in the river and lakes inhibits recreation access.*

## 2.2 EXISTING RECREATION ACTIVITIES

Since the return of flowing water to the river in 2006, the resurgence and recovery of the local ecosystem has resulted in a rediscovery of the area by anglers, paddle boaters, bird watchers and other recreationists. Although not well supported by existing recreation facilities, the following recreation activities take place in the LORP area today.

### HIKING, SCENIC DRIVING AND BIKING

There are no established hiking trails or designated paths in the LORP. However, existing roads (with little vehicle traffic) provide access for hikers.

Scenic driving and road biking mostly occur along Highway 395. The portion of Highway 395 from Independence to north of Tinemaha Reservoir is a designated State Scenic Highway. Few drivers and road cyclists travel off the main road because of poor road conditions including a lack of paved roads and directional signage.

Mountain biking may take place along the many unimproved roads in the LORP, but present levels of use are not documented. Constraints include a lack of marked routes, “sand traps” in areas of deep alkali dust, fencing, gates and cattle guards.



*This Great Blue Heron near the Delta illustrates one of many opportunities to experience the area's birds and wildlife.*

## BOATING AND SWIMMING

The return of flowing water to the river created the expectation that non-motorized boating, and particularly canoeing and kayaking, would become significant recreation uses. However, a lack of access points and signage, small culverts under roadways that have restricted passage, and the widespread growth of tules and other aquatic vegetation have limited non-motorized boating. Some canoeing and kayaking does occur, but only along short stretches of the river. If current conditions persist, repeat visits by people other than locals are unlikely.

Local residents currently take advantage of several popular swimming holes on the Lower Owens River, such as one near the old railroad trestle. Tubing opportunities are limited because of the growth of tules and aquatic vegetation that make the shallow river impassible in many places.

## FISHING

Fishing is a well-established use that pre-dates the return of water to the river. Prior to the return of water, most of the fishing occurred in off-river lakes and ponds. Some fishing also occurred in parts of the river channel below Billy Lake, where groundwater and surface flows remained. No native fish are present in the Lower Owens River today. However, most of the river is a productive and highly valued warm-water fishery especially prized for bass.

LADWP has worked with the Warmwater Fishing Association and local anglers to identify important access points, and has provided multiple fence pass-throughs to facilitate access to the river. The LORP Final Environmental Impact Report called for signage describing LADWP policies on recreational uses and showing major access points and where fences cross the





*Tules can be harvested and use to create rustic bird blinds envisioned along the Blackrock Birding Trail.*

river. In 2010, LADWP installed six kiosks in key locations that included this and other relevant information for users.

## BIRDING, WILDLIFE VIEWING, AND HUNTING

The addition of water to the Lower Owens River has restored habitat for fish, birds and mammals. As a result, birding and wildlife viewing are growing activities in the LORP area, with birding activities increasing significantly over the past few years. Popular birding areas include the Blackrock Waterfowl Management Area (WMA), the Delta area and the riparian area of the river. Birding is both a self-directed and programmed activity, with the California Audubon leading trips to the area for local and out-of-area visitors.

Waterfowl hunting takes place primarily in the Blackrock WMA, Delta and riparian areas in season. Elk, deer and upland game hunting also takes place along the river.

## OFF-HIGHWAY VEHICLE (OHV) RIDING

OHV/ATV use is a popular activity, particularly in the Lone Pine area. OHV use is increasingly restricted on nearby federal lands, while anecdotal evidence suggests that OHV activity has increased in the LORP area. Further, it is anticipated that OHV use will increase in the LORP area as a result of the launch of the Eastern Sierra Adventure Trails System, a State and County supported program that could allow OHV use on main arteries (County roads) within the LORP. While most OHV users drive responsibly, even a small number of irresponsible users can create significant damage to fragile desert and riparian ecosystems.



*LADWP installed information boards to help orient and inform recreation users.*

## CAMPING AND PICNICKING

Camping is prohibited by LADWP, as are all overnight uses. Occasional overnight camping has been reported to occur within the LORP. There are several camping opportunities near the LORP, including private campgrounds, public campgrounds at Diaz Lake and Boulder Creek, as well as dispersed camping allowed on nearby Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands.

There are no existing picnic facilities in the LORP. Even though several suitable sites exist along the main access roads, the lack of shade and other amenities and facilities (tables, trash receptacles, shelters, etc.) does not encourage the use of these sites for family or group picnics.

## HISTORIC AND CULTURAL TOURISM

Local attractions include the Manzanar National Historic Site and the Lone Pine Film History Museum, both of which are considered attractions of national interest. The Eastern California Museum at Independence draws visitors from around the state and region, as does the Federal Interagency Visitor Center just south of Lone Pine. The County is exploring grant opportunities to fund an interpretive center in Independence focused on the Lower Owens River.

The Lower Owens River area was occupied and used by Native Americans for thousands of years. Local tribal members still use the area for traditional resource gathering. Historic and prehistoric artifacts and sites are a physical and cultural link to the past and must be protected.





*River Road is part of the proposed pathway for the Lower Owens River Trail.*

## VOLUNTEER STEWARDSHIP AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

An annual clean-up event in the LORP area has encouraged volunteer support of site maintenance. The recovering ecosystem provides an excellent opportunity for an outdoor laboratory where tourists and local citizens can learn about natural and cultural resources. In addition, local schools have incorporated lessons about the Lower Owens River into their curriculum. At the same time, lack of facilities limits on-site programs. Environmental education will be a focus of the LORP interpretive center that Inyo County plans to develop (noted in discussion of historic and cultural tourism on the previous page).

## 2.3 RECREATION USE LEVELS AND FUTURE POTENTIAL

The high desert Eastern Sierra landscape in Inyo County is largely in public ownership, managed by federal agencies. Public lands attract millions of visitors, mostly from urban regions of California, but also from across the nation and even the world. Seasonal tourism is increasingly important to the area's economy. The City of Los Angeles owns the land within the LORP area and allows public access with restrictions.

While specific recreation use levels for the Lower Owens River have not been studied, regional visitation and comparisons to nearby recreation areas help to paint a picture of the level of current use and the potential for expanding Lower Owens River recreation activity.



*In some areas, gates will be replaced with cattle guards to reduce user conflicts.*

#### CALTRANS ORIGIN AND DESTINATION STUDY (2000)

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) conducted an Origin and Destination study during the months of February, March and August of 2000. The purpose of the study was to obtain information about trip movements and travel patterns on US 395 in Inyo and Mono Counties in order to plan future transportation needs and project future economic growth. Caltrans personnel conducted roadside interviews with vehicle occupants at four major entry points in the winter and six major entry points in the summer both on and feeding into US 395 in Inyo and Mono Counties.

Survey findings help paint a picture of use and visitation in the Lower Owens River area for future, detailed study and projections. Relevant questionnaire findings are shown below:

- Recreation was given as the main purpose of the trip by 55% of the respondents
- Sixty percent of the people named Inyo or Mono County as their destination
- Forty percent of the travelers were driving through the Eastern Sierra to reach their final destination without staying overnight. The majority (69%) of overnight visitors stay in Mono County.
- Thirty-one percent of the traveling public said they always stop in small communities for services other than gas; 48% said they sometimes stop; and, 21% said they never stop
- Thirty-six percent of the vehicles came from Southern California
- One percent of the travelers came from out of the country; Germany was number one foreign country of origin
- Forty-two percent of the overnight visitors were staying in a motel or hotel versus 37% staying in a campground





*The Owens River, Alabama Hills and Sierra Mountains are in close proximity and may draw the same recreation users.*

## ALABAMA HILLS RECREATION MANAGEMENT AREA

The Alabama Hills Recreation Management Area (AHRMA) is a popular recreation area near the Lower Owens River area, roughly equidistant from Lone Pine. Established in 1969, this 29,920 acre Bureau of Land Management (BLM) recreation area sits just to the west and above the Lower Owens River. Using recent traffic counts (fall 2012), BLM estimates 121,640 visits and 39,317 visitor days.

Like the Lower Owens River area, the AHRMA:

- Boasts wide open lands close to Lone Pine, CA
- Includes a mix of passenger roads, 4WD roads and hiking trails
- Is a “no fee” area
- Boasts scenic vistas of Mt. Whitney and the highest portion of the Sierra Nevada crest
- Has lively indigenous Native American and cattleman histories (AHRMA has the added claim of being a central stage for early television and movie westerns)

Notable differences between the Lower Owens River and AHRMA include the following:

- The Lower Owens River is over twice the size of the AHRMA (77,000 acres vs. 30,000 acres)
- Camping is permitted in AHRMA, but prohibited in the Lower Owens River area
- The local chambers, hotels, and area businesses all promote the AHRMA
- Many state and national publications have written travelogue stories about the area and many well-known photographic images come from the AHRMA. It has long been the setting for commercials and films.



# 3

## preferred concept for enhanced recreation

This chapter presents the recreation-oriented goals that Inyo County seeks to accomplish through the development and implementation of the Lower Owens River Recreation Use Plan. Following the goals, this chapter describes the envisioned recreation enhancements and amenities that together make up the preferred recreation concept. An illustrative map highlights the major physical features.

### 3.1 RECREATION USE PLAN GOALS AND DIRECTIONS

As with the rest of this document, the Recreation Use Plan goals for the Lower Owens River reflect community and agency direction alike, and are intended to focus recreation planning and improvements in a way that both showcases and protects the area's greatest natural and cultural assets.

The preferred concept for enhanced recreation in the Lower Owens River is based on a desire to achieve the following five goals:

1. Strengthen the area's nature-based tourist economy
2. Create opportunities for low-impact exploration and wildlife observation
3. Design a system to improve area access and wayfinding
4. Improve river and lake access for fishing, canoeing and kayaking
5. Inspire cultural and environmental education, learning, and stewardship



*Rather than interpretive panels, which are expensive to make and maintain, this plan envisions “virtual” interpretation and the possible use of Quick Response (QR) codes to provide visitors access to interpretive information using a personal smartphone device.*

## **GOAL 1: STRENGTHEN THE AREA'S NATURE-BASED TOURIST ECONOMY**

While community expectations about the economic development potential of the Lower Owens River range from reserved to ambitious, local businesses stand to benefit from even modest increases in visitation to the river. Promoting the Lower Owens River as a destination for outdoor recreation and making targeted investments will encourage tourists to consider the area a reason to travel, rather than just a stopover. This document is intended to clarify the vision and help create the forward momentum for the County and LADWP to create greater opportunity for nature-based recreation in all seasons; however, from an economic development perspective, increasing shoulder season visitation and recreation (i.e. during the spring and fall) is the most important.

## **GOAL 2: CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR LOW-IMPACT EXPLORATION AND WILDLIFE OBSERVATION**

Trail-related recreation is popular among all ages and can be inclusive of many interests and activities. Over 80 percent of online questionnaire participants and three quarters of planning workshop participants (May 2011) expressed a desire to establish a multi-use trail network to facilitate exploration of the Lower Owens River area. The proposed backbone of this network is a length of the river trail open to all recreation activities, including motorized and non-motorized uses alike.





*River access must be compatible with riparian habitat conservation.*

This plan also proposes designation of trails for birders in the Blackrock WMA and Delta habitat area. Observational in nature, birding is a low impact recreation activity, and growing in popularity in the Lower Owens River and the region. Proposed improvements focus on expanding passive enjoyment of the area's natural system, features and wildlife.

The recreation concept for the Lower Owens River hinges on the addition of understated improvements that encourage low-impact recreation, and the integration of clear guidance and cues for visitors that encourage them to tread lightly and leave behind no physical trace of their experience when they go. Amenities will be minimal in nature and common day-use facilities will not be provided.

### **GOAL 3: DESIGN A SYSTEM TO IMPROVE AREA ACCESS AND WAYFINDING**

The Lower Owens River represents a unique recreation destination which, currently, few people know about or can find. The concept for recreation in the Lower Owens River area relies on modest and practical improvements, with directional signage perhaps the most notable need and logical starting place. A four-tiered wayfinding program will encourage visitation by identifying appropriate access points, and will keep visitors on the right path once inside the Lower Owens River area. New signage will also help establish an identity for the Lower Owens River



*This is an example of an existing well designed staging area that includes orientation, a cattle grate and parking.*

that reflects the primitive beauty of the Owens Valley, and the quiet pride and aspirations of the local community and area enthusiasts. The envisioned, tiered approach to signage and wayfinding will be simple, understated, and should be designed so it is relatively cost effective to maintain.

#### **GOAL 4: IMPROVE RIVER AND LAKE ACCESS FOR FISHING, CANOEING AND KAYAKING**

The Lower Owens River and its series of off-shore lakes and ponds are the LOR's central resource and are worthy of becoming a known area attraction. Community members expressed strong support for improving river access for canoes and kayaks; 63 percent (48 people) of May 2011 workshop participants identified improved river access as "extremely important". As noted by one participant, "Without access, people will carve their own paths, leading to stream bank erosion and environmental degradation. Non-motorized river recreation can be very low impact, as long as access issues are addressed, signed and properly managed."

The preferred concept for water-based recreation includes river and lake access improvements for boaters (non-motorized craft only) and anglers in few, select locations. Physical improvements will be simple, low impact and low cost. Like trail-related improvements, they will reflect





*Directional signs will point people to recreation destinations.*

and facilitate a “leave no trace” ethic and experience. The Lower Owens River Paddle Trail, discussed later in this chapter, will begin with two designated stretches, one through the Blackrock WMA and a second that runs from the Lone Pine Staging Area to the Pumpback Station to the south.

#### **GOAL 5: INSPIRE CULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION, LEARNING, AND STEWARDSHIP**

Community members have expressed a strong interest in establishing the Lower Owens River as an accessible resource and center for environmental education and stewardship. One May 2011 workshop participant noted, “Environmental education is a critical component in any management plan. The river provides an outdoor classroom for local and visiting schools, and helps connect people with place.” This plan proposes development of an interpretive program for the LOR to share the many stories and truths surrounding the area’s natural, cultural, social and economic past and current-day significance. A proposal to develop a Lower Owens River interpretive facility in Independence is being considered separately from this plan.

Building partnerships with schools, local tribes, community scientists and stewards will be instrumental to supporting the development of related curriculum and programs and encouraging increased visitation and experiential learning in the LOR area.



# MAP 1 recreation use plan













*Highway 395 is the main artery for recreation visitors. Signage will direct travelers to access the LOR via six different gateways.*

## 3.2 RECREATION ENHANCEMENTS AND AMENITIES

By creating an integrated system for wayfinding, recreation and interpretation that supports a variety of day use activities and visitor experiences, Inyo County and LADWP can better leverage the true value of this unique landscape.

The proposed recreation enhancements represent a minimally scaled, nature-inspired approach to recreation development consistent with the goals of the Lower Owens River Project (LORP) for restoration of the area's ecosystem.

The map on page 27 illustrates the preferred recreation concept for the Lower Owens River. Major elements are described in the pages that follow. Tables 1 through 3, presented later in this chapter, outline key planning and design assumptions and probable project costs for the suite of physical improvements and programmatic responses proposed for the short and mid-term. Formal environmental study will be needed to implement specific projects as part of this effort.

### WAYFINDING AND DIRECTIONAL SIGNAGE

The primary objectives for creating a formal program of wayfinding and directional signage for the Lower Owens River area include:

- Promote recreation area use and exploration;
- Increase confidence and safety in navigating the Lower Owens River and improve the travel experience within and between its destinations;



*The current lack of signage makes orientation and navigation very challenging.*

- Protect the environment and minimize conflicts with current operations by designating specific or preferred routes of travel; and
- Help establish a cohesive and consistent image for the Lower Owens River.

Directional signs and trail markers are envisioned to be harmonious with the surrounding natural environment, and should be designed to reflect the desire of agencies and local communities for a clean and understated approach to branding the LOR. The proposed program for wayfinding and directional signage is based on a four-tier approach that includes the following major features:

### ***HIGHWAY 395 DIRECTIONAL SIGNS***

Strengthening area visibility and access is a critical first step in increasing area visitation. Classic highway directional signs for recreation use areas will be placed along Highway 395 at six LOR gateway locations:

- Blackrock Waterfowl Management Area
- Mazourka Canyon
- Manzanar
- Lone Pine
- Pumpback Station
- Delta

Sign design will conform to Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) 2012 guidelines, which allow for design of the classic “white on brown” directional signs for recreation uses.





*Improving navigation within the LOR is a high priority of this plan.*

### ***INTERIOR GATEWAY SIGNS***

Once visitors turn off of Highway 395, they will be welcomed by and pass through an interior gateway. These interior gateway signs or structures will play an important role in creating an identity for the LOR and should reflect the primitive character, scale and unique attributes of the area. This may be the visitor's first encounter with the LOR logo and use regulations (i.e. "day use only").

### ***INTERIOR DIRECTIONAL SIGNS***

Directional signs placed on LADWP and County roads are intended to direct users to main destinations. Each sign should denote basic direction and distance to signed destinations. Signs would also be placed in key locations where unsafe roads in poor condition exist, or to denote dead-ends.

Key locations for sign placement (angled for visibility) include intersections and major turn-offs, or at strategic locations along long stretches of road. Some roads may be gated, including the Power Line access, the Intake, and roads that access the floodplain.

### ***TRAIL MARKERS***

This wayfinding concept includes the cost-efficient use of Carsonite signs and dolomite cairns to mark the proposed trail routes (Lower Owens River Trail and Blackrock and Delta birding trails). Route markers should be designed to an appropriate scale to encourage pedestrian use. In the case of the Lower Owens River Trail, route markers at major intersections or turn-off



*This image depicts a portion of the proposed Blackrock birding trail.*

**TABLE 1. WAYFINDING AND DIRECTIONAL SIGNAGE: PLANNING ASSUMPTIONS + COST ESTIMATES**

PROPOSED IMPROVEMENT	KEY PLANNING AND DESIGN ASSUMPTIONS	PROJECT COST
NEW PROJECT SIGNAGE DESIGN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cost for design of three sign types used for wayfinding along highways, interior gateways and trails</li> <li>Cost includes fabrication research, recommendations, a sign program/schedule, and production-ready artwork</li> </ul>	\$30,000
DIRECTIONAL SIGNS ALONG HIGHWAY 395 (PRODUCTION AND INSTALLATION)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two at each of six gateway locations</li> <li>Signs conform with Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD, California 2012)</li> <li>Installation by Caltrans</li> <li>Cost for sign production only. Installation costs are excluded.</li> </ul>	\$16,000
INTERIOR GATEWAY SIGNS (PRODUCTION AND INSTALLATION)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Six interior County roadway locations</li> <li>One sign per location</li> <li>Installation by County staff</li> <li>Cost for sign production only. Labor costs are excluded.</li> </ul>	\$45,000
INTERIOR DIRECTIONAL SIGNS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two directional signs at each of 11 key intersections</li> <li>Installation by County staff</li> <li>Carsonite or corrugated metal signs</li> </ul>	\$2,500
TRAIL MARKERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Roughly sixty miles of Lower Owens River Trail</li> <li>Dolomite cairns with carsonite signs along the trail</li> <li>Dolomite cairns roughly 2x2 ft (1/3 ton of material per cairn)</li> <li>120 total cairns with mileage markers</li> <li>98 intersection cairns (2 cairns per intersection)</li> </ul>	\$78,000 (Approximately \$350 per cairn)





*This portion of road could become part of the Lower Owens River Trail.*

points should be designed to improve navigation for the automobile and pedestrians alike. Trail markers are envisioned to include simple decals with: mileage locations noted to the half-mile; a logo or identifiable icon for the Lower Owens River or Lower Owens River Trail; directional cues (arrows), where needed; and, in strategic locations, icons that communicate use regulations or reference notable interpretive features.

## LOWER OWENS RIVER MULTI-USE TRAIL SYSTEM

### **LOWER OWENS RIVER TRAIL**

The Lower Owens River Trail is the proposed length of river trail envisioned to run on either side of the river from Blackrock WMA in the north to the Delta in the south. The trail, open to motorized and non-motorized trail activities would run along existing roads or tracks. Simple directional signage at key intersections and trail or mileage markers in the form of carsonite signs and dolomite cairns would serve to help keep trail users on the right path.

Over time, side trails or loops may be identified and designated for non-motorized users to access the riparian area; in some cases these may lead all the way to the river's edge. Some of these trails and pathways are envisioned to follow existing roads, while others could follow the carved paths of cattle or wildlife.

Motorized users will be restricted to existing roads and tracks, and will not be allowed in any future riparian zone trails. Staging area kiosks and interior signage should define routes and areas open for automobile and ATV/OHV use; off-limit areas should also be clearly identified.

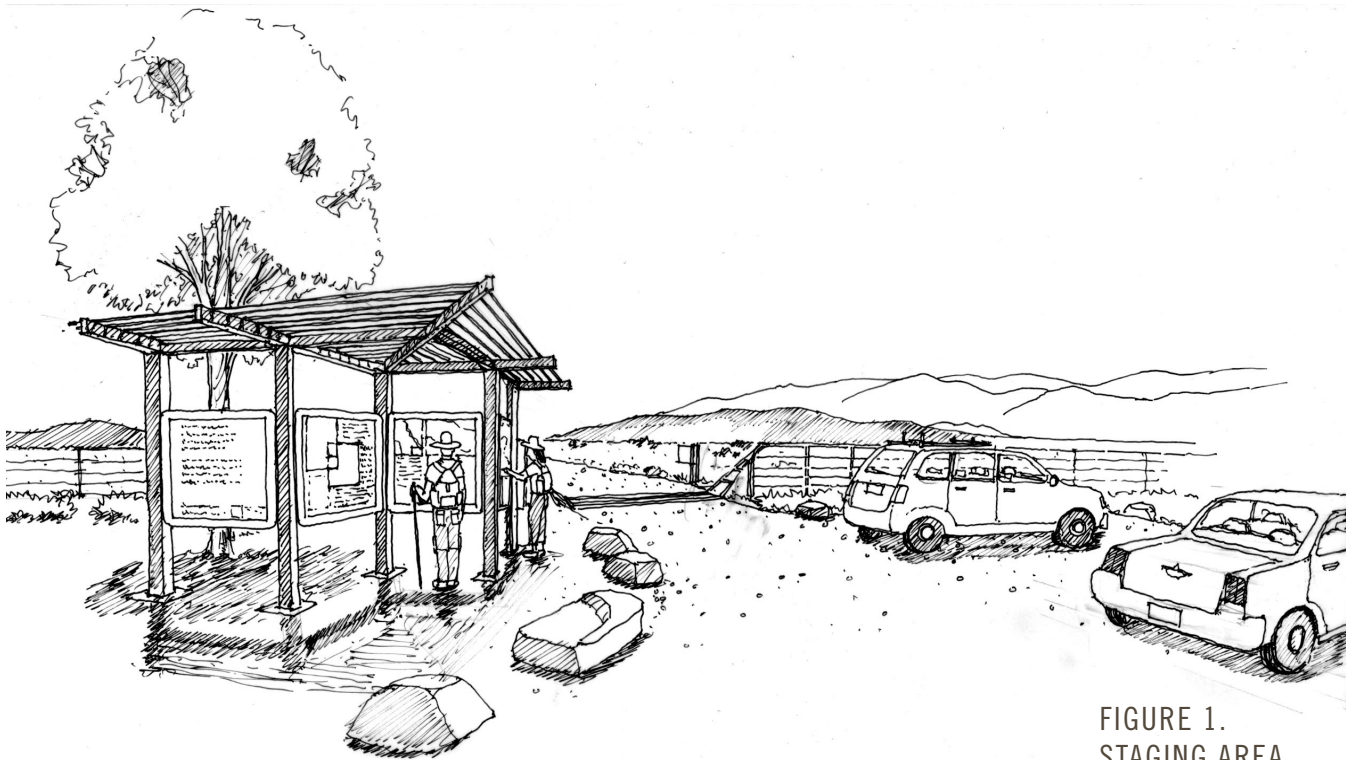


FIGURE 1.  
STAGING AREA  
DESIGN CONCEPT

In order to facilitate trail designation and safe trail use and area access, stretches of roadway that have been subject to water damage may require repair or stabilization. Current damaged sections range from 10 feet to 1,250 feet in length. If sections are not improved, drivers divert from the road and “blowouts” happen, or new roads appear as drivers seek to avoid the mud/powder holes in the road depressions.

LADWP may need to close trails temporarily to allow for necessary operations and maintenance activities.

Horseback riding currently occurs near the river, but the level of interest in riding is not known. If riding is to be encouraged, parking to accommodate horse trailers and other equestrian trailhead amenities should be provided

### ***KIOSKS AND STAGING AREAS***

The preferred plan concept includes six staging areas, one for each corresponding gateway to the LOR. Staging areas are envisioned as recognizable access and orientation points for users, generally associated with one or more trailheads. The Blackrock WMA, Lone Pine and Pumpback Station staging areas would also serve as river access points, with boat access areas located in close proximity (see River Access and Paddle Trail description, below).

Staging area kiosks will welcome and orient visitors with an illustrative LOR map, area use guidelines and regulations, and interpretive information reflective of a theme corresponding with that particular area. Toilets, potable water, and picnic benches would not be provided.

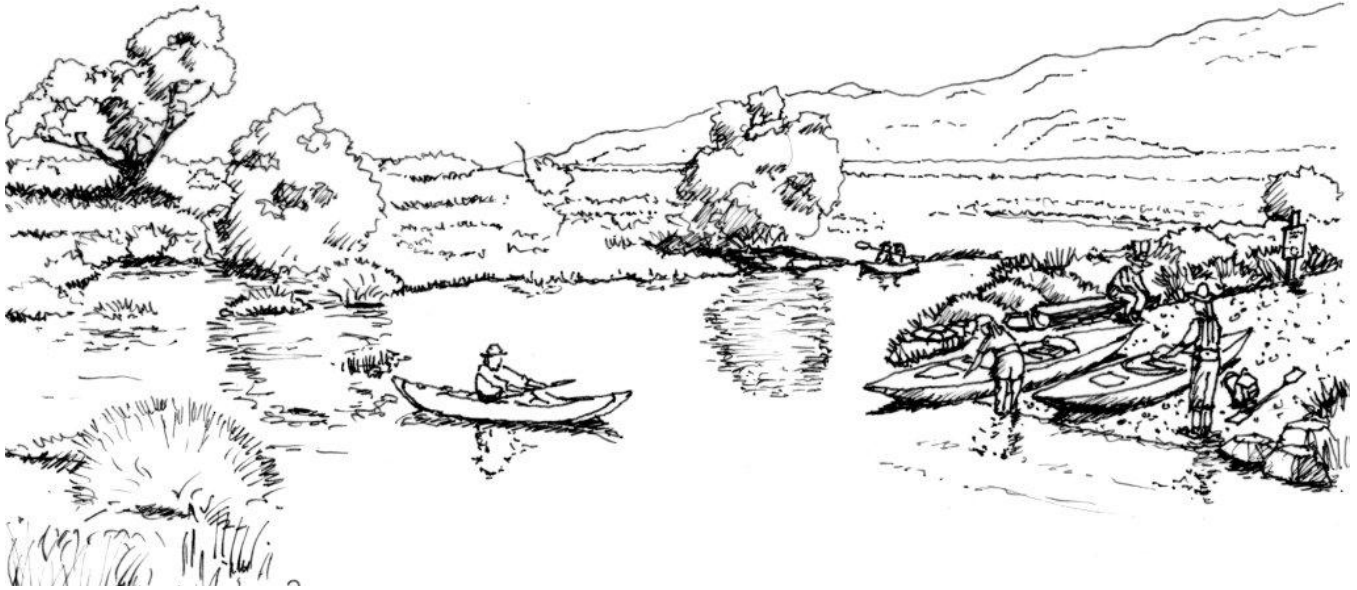


FIGURE 2.  
BOAT LAUNCH  
DESIGN CONCEPT

### ***BLACKROCK AND DELTA BIRDING TRAILS***

The preferred concept for enhanced recreation includes designated birding trails in the Blackrock Waterfowl Management Area and Delta habitat area. These trails would follow existing roads or tracks, accessed primarily via the Lower Owens River Trail and via interior roadways. Rustic viewing blinds made of natural materials like willows or tules would be placed at key points along the trails, along with rustic benches. The birding trails would be subject to seasonal closures due to high water or nesting, where necessary.

A marsh boardwalk could be added to the Delta birding trail in the future.

### ***LONE PINE HERITAGE TRAIL***

The long-term vision includes development of the Lone Pine Heritage Trail. This trail would connect Lone Pine with the river to the east, the Alabama Hills to the west, and possibly to the Interagency Visitor Center and Diaz Lake Recreation area to the south. This trail concept integrates various interpretive, environmental and cultural learning opportunities with trail-based recreation. In one variation, this project proposes redesign of Highway 395 through central Lone Pine with the goal of creating a stronger “main street” atmosphere. The Lone Pine Heritage Trail concept was developed by Lone Pine Economic Development Corporation and several partners, with support from the National Park Service. It is partly in and partly outside of the LORP boundary.





*Improving river access for boating is a priority for local outdoor enthusiasts.*

### **RIVER ACCESS AND PADDLE TRAILS**

The proposed Lower Owens River Paddle Trail includes two paddle segments with signed and improved access to the river from the riparian shore. The south segment would run roughly from the Lone Pine Staging Area to the Pumpback Station. The north paddle trail segment would run much of the length of the Blackrock WMA, beginning just north of Upper Twin Lake and ending near the WMA boundary.

Each segment would have signed put-ins and take-outs, with intermittent signs along the paddle routes. Boat launch and take-out sites are envisioned as simple, level gravel and sand beaches leading to the water's edge from the Lower Owens River Trail or adjacent staging or parking area. No other amenities or facilities would be provided.

To improve access for fishing (discussed in more detail later) this plan proposes formally identifying select fishing locations. The goal is to make fishing more accessible in a few areas, while leaving less familiar or unknown fishing holes to the quiet enjoyment of anglers who prefer to discover the river for themselves. Signed, designated fishing areas are proposed at the Pumpback Station Area, and where Manzanar and Mazourka Roads cross the river. Billy Lake is a logical priority for improved lake fishing access.

Where improved riparian access for fishing is desired, such areas would follow the same general development guidelines as for boat access (a small cleared area and gravel path).



TABLE 2. LOR MULTI-USE TRAIL SYSTEM: PLANNING ASSUMPTIONS + COST ESTIMATES

PROPOSED IMPROVEMENT	KEY PLANNING AND DESIGN ASSUMPTIONS	PROJECT COST
INTERPRETIVE PLANNING AND DESIGN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop content for a 4-panel kiosk, including theme, messaging and information for each panel</li> <li>Back side of panels will be one large graphic</li> <li>One panel will include an illustrative map of the area</li> <li>3 panels will be consistent at all sites</li> <li>1 panel will vary by site</li> </ul>	\$30,000
KIOSKS AND STAGING AREA IMPROVEMENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Six locations including kiosk with gravel driveway and parking area</li> <li>Kiosks fabricated offsite by metal fabricator</li> <li>Permitting is excluded</li> </ul>	\$105,000
LOWER OWENS RIVER TRAIL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintenance to 8,500 linear feet total (average 12 ft wide) to achieve USFS Level 2 road maintenance standards</li> <li>Clearing, minor grading and fill for low areas</li> <li>Permitting is excluded</li> </ul>	\$70,000
PADDLE TRAIL AND BOATING ACCESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Includes design of low impact put-in/take-out point</li> <li>Assumes 3 put-in/take-out points are built</li> <li>Each site includes approximately 320 square feet and requires only clearing and minor grading</li> <li>Use of geotextile fabric, sand and gravel mix</li> <li>Permitting is excluded</li> </ul>	\$23,000
BLACKROCK BIRDING TRAIL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Design (includes preparation of standard cross-section and layout)</li> <li>Clearing and minor grading along a 3-mile length of 5' wide trail</li> <li>Use of gravel and sand mix for trail surface</li> <li>Permitting is excluded</li> </ul>	\$70,000
BIRD BLINDS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assumes 3 blinds located along birding trail</li> <li>Includes site clearing, minor grading and gravel and sand surfacing</li> <li>Blind will be a steel frame with tule bundles used as screens with a wooden viewing bench</li> <li>Permitting is excluded</li> </ul>	\$30,000
MARSH BOARDWALK AT DELTA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assumes 1,000 ft long boardwalk</li> <li>Location to be determined in consultation with DWP</li> <li>Assumes mitigation will be required</li> </ul>	\$325,000
CEQA ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Preparation of an Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration (IS/MND)</li> <li>Assumes that biological and cultural resources are the only topics that require preparation of technical memos</li> </ul>	\$50,000



*Accessing virtual information about a site by scanning a Quick Response (QR) code mounted on a small, durable sign can both reduce maintenance costs and minimize impact on the landscape.*

## AREA BRANDING AND INTERPRETATION

Establishing a consistent design character for area signage and amenities is an important step in enhancing the user experience, and doing so in a way that reflects and reinforces the area's true and desired identity. Construction materials, graphics and illustrations can be used to help create a strong yet understated brand and sense of place. Many of these design choices will have practical implications also, which are equally important.

The rich and fabled history of the Owens Valley presents countless opportunities for interpretation. The area's geology and natural history, the story of the area's cultural and working landscapes, the political history of the river, and the challenges and successes associated with one of the largest restoration efforts in the country are all stories that deserve to be told. Staging area kiosks are envisioned as the primary physical platform for sharing information about the different Lower Owens regions (described on page 34). This information will be practical, educational and inspirational.

The Plan also envisions a virtual interpretive element, whereby visitors have opportunity to access information relevant to their current location via the use of Quick Response (QR) codes and personal smartphone devices. The use and placement of virtual interpretive features described in this Plan will depend on the quality of cell signal coverage near LOR destinations. A pilot program can be developed to determine the best locations for QR code-enabled interpretive features.



*The proposed Delta birding trail could be enhanced via the creation of a virtual interpretive program that gives visitors online access to fun facts, graphics and other information about the area’s natural history, recent recovery, and key species.*

**TABLE 3. LOR BRANDING AND INTERPRETATION: PLANNING ASSUMPTIONS + COST ESTIMATES**

PROPOSED IMPROVEMENT	KEY PLANNING AND DESIGN ASSUMPTIONS	PROJECT COST
LOR LOGO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Logo design and branding process. Includes 2 options.</li> <li>• Final preferred logo will include a color palette and graphic standard guidance memo</li> </ul>	\$10,000
VIRTUAL INTERPRETIVE PROGRAM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop 3 interpretive narratives to address historical, cultural, and environmental topics</li> <li>• Narrative information (text, maps, photos, video) to be accessed by scanning a Quick Response (QR) code with a personal smart phone device or typing in a URL</li> <li>• Design of physical e-sign will identify the feature, location, and feature number within the narrative series</li> <li>• Cost includes e-sign design and production-ready artwork only. Production and installation costs are excluded.</li> <li>• HTML files will be housed on a County website</li> </ul>	\$18,000





# 4

## plan implementation and area management

This chapter outlines management priorities and principles for the Lower Owens River area, which are based on the collective priorities of LADWP, Inyo County, the Tribes, local ranchers and other participating community members. The chapter concludes with a discussion of environmental constraints that need to be considered prior to plan implementation.

### 4.1 COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE ON LOWER OWENS RIVER MANAGEMENT

Community members and plan stakeholders revealed a wide range of interests and concerns over the course of plan development. However, there was substantial agreement that future LOR management and operations address the following issues.

- Regulations and public information
- Protection of cultural resources
- Ranching leases and recreation
- Tule growth and management
- Facility maintenance and operations

Notable issues and proposed management approaches related to each are described in more detail below.

#### REGULATIONS AND PUBLIC INFORMATION

Community participants noted a critical need to better publicize recreation opportunities, and to communicate policies and regulations regarding public access and use clearly and consistently. As the number of recreation users increase, clearly defined, enforceable policies will be needed to define allowable activities, overnight use restrictions, OHV/ATV restrictions, gate use, laws protecting cultural artifacts, and “leave no trace” principles.



*Local Paiute Tribes and others are concerned about protecting cultural resource sites within the LOR.*

## PROTECTION OF CULTURAL RESOURCES

The potential for illegal artifact gathering has been identified as a significant concern of local tribes. Tribal representatives and others fear that increased river recreation will increase the incidence of this damaging and illegal behavior. Historic and prehistoric artifacts are important, irreplaceable resources that must remain undisturbed. Community members expressed a desire that recreation facilities be located away from areas known to have artifacts. Signage and information should remind visitors that found artifacts must be left undisturbed, as per Federal law.

## RANCHING LEASES AND RECREATION

For many years, ranchers have leased most of the Lower Owens River Project area. Lease holders are concerned about the impact that increased recreation will have on their cattle operations, including cattle management and the condition of the rangeland. The City of Los Angeles has a policy to keep at least 75 percent of their lands open to the public. Under this policy, ranchers can post up to 25 percent of leased land as no trespassing; however, few restrict access to more than 10 percent. Ranchers are concerned that recreation users will leave gates open, block gates, and otherwise create conflicts with existing ranching operations.

Local ranchers noted that improvements such as new cattle guards at key locations, directional signage and signs that identify the family ranches on LORP lands could help reduce the possibility of additional financial and maintenance responsibilities associated with disruption or damage to their operations.





*The pumpback station is a popular and easily accessible fishing area.*

## TULE GROWTH AND MANAGEMENT

Tules, large bulrush plants and cattails that are abundant in marshy areas have grown extensively over portions of the Lower Owens River channel since re-watering, significantly reducing recreation access. Tules occupy some areas that were previously open water, reducing fishing and boating access and reducing open water habitats. Several stakeholders noted that tules may create unsafe conditions in portions of the channel and feel that active management of tules is critical to expanding open water habitat and providing needed access for in-stream recreation.

To date, limited mechanical management of tules has occurred in portions of the river, but this has not occurred for the purpose of improving recreation access. Mechanical methods could be used to facilitate creation of paddle routes, but there are no current plans to do so. Currently, the County and LADWP plan to leave tules unmanaged with the exception of manipulating seasonal water levels.

LADWP and Inyo County have recently agreed to study how more variable river flows may help control tules in some areas and improve water quality for fisheries. Variable water flows may be successful in establishing some relatively tule-free river stretches for recreation. However, experts caution that this strategy may have limited effectiveness due to geographic constraints.



*Current regulations prohibit overnight camping or fire.*

## FACILITY MAINTENANCE AND OPERATIONS

Outside contractors currently operate some County facilities, in part due to lack of staff. LADWP does not have park rangers or recreation managers, resulting in limited enforcement of current area use regulations. Facility development and the anticipated increase in number of visitors will inevitably increase the need for facility repair, visitor contact and communication, and site monitoring and maintenance, which is a concern in light of limited agency capacity and resources.

As the landowner and primary manager, LADWP is concerned that increased recreation may interfere with its regular operations. Ongoing maintenance and operations may require temporary road closures, the use or occupation of roads and trails by heavy equipment, and access to water control facilities. It is imperative that LADWP is able to carry out these necessary tasks, irrespective of their potential impact on public recreation opportunities. Further, ecosystem recovery is a primary objective of area management, and one LADWP and the County are mindful of.

The Lower Owens River Project Post Implementation Agreement (PIA) between Inyo County and LADWP provides guidance with respect to planning, approval, construction and maintenance of recreation and other facilities within the planning area.

The current day-use only policy is supported by most community members who have participated in plan development. Concerns exist that any overnight use could increase the risk of fire. Nearby areas provide ample camping opportunities, alleviating strong concerns that prohibited overnight use will become a serious problem. Nevertheless, signage at staging area kiosks that clearly spells out the “no camping” policy is needed.





*LADWP, Inyo County staff and project consultants spent time in the field exploring current conditions and project possibilities.*

**TABLE 4. MINIMIZING AND MITIGATING IMPACT: PLANNING ASSUMPTIONS + COST ESTIMATES**

PROPOSED IMPROVEMENT	KEY PLANNING AND DESIGN ASSUMPTIONS	PROJECT COST
“RANCHING FAMILY” SIGNAGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Classic, understated signs with ranch family names at ranch gates and border provided by Inyo County</li> <li>• Assumes 1-2 signs per ranch</li> <li>• Leasees may supplement sign budget and customize design to meet Inyo County sign regulations and standards</li> <li>• Cost for sign production only. Labor costs are excluded.</li> </ul>	Allow \$2500 each
CATTLE GUARDS WITH SIDE ACCESS GATE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Five new cattle guards needed</li> <li>• Side access gate allows movement of livestock around cattle guard</li> </ul>	\$47,500
POWDER RIVER LIVESTOCK GATES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tube steel gates installed over roads</li> <li>• Require drivers to open and close gates for through access</li> </ul>	\$10,000 each





*LADWP and Inyo County work together to implement the Lower Owens River Project and minimize negative impacts to the recovering ecosystem.*

## 4.2 LOWER OWENS RIVER MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

In light of the ongoing issues and challenges identified during the plan development process, this plan proposes that future management and development within the Lower Owens River area adhere to the following principles:

- Continue to prioritize Lower Owens River Project (LORP) goals and the ecological restoration of riparian habitat over recreation;
- Minimize conflict between recreation, ranching and LADWP operations by installing signs, cattle guards, and gates where needed and by improving some roads;
- Protect existing cultural resources, artifacts and areas by collaborating with local Tribes and steering recreation away from sensitive areas; and
- Place clear and frequent signage in strategic locations to outline area use guidelines and restrictions, and to share information about existing operations.

## 4.3 ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW AND DESIGN

The elements described in this Recreation Use Plan are presented to provide direction, but implementation or construction of the elements will not occur until after subsequent review has occurred, as required by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The next step in the planning process is to analyze environmental impacts associated with the Recreation Use Plan. To meet the requirements of CEQA, it has been determined that, at a minimum, preparation of an Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration (IS/MND) will be necessary to advance implementation of this plan. An IS/MND would describe the project's potential environmental impacts and define feasible mitigations that will reduce impacts to less than significant levels.



*Lower Owens River near Lone Pine.*

For the project to comply with CEQA, mitigations must be incorporated into the project. A preliminary environmental report drafted by Eco Sciences, *LORP Recreation Use Plan, High Level Environmental Review*, is included in Appendix D.





