

Digital Storytelling for Public Land Management: Best Practices

BY ANGUS MCREYNOLDS AND RACHAEL BUDOWLE
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Digital Storytelling for Public Land Management: Best Practices

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Authors:

Angus McReynolds, Graduate Student | M.S. in Natural Science with a Concentration in Natural Science Education; Concurrent Major in Environment and Natural Resources

Rachael Budowle, Ph.D. | Assistant Professor, Community Resilience and Sustainability

Ruckelshaus Institute, Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources, University of Wyoming

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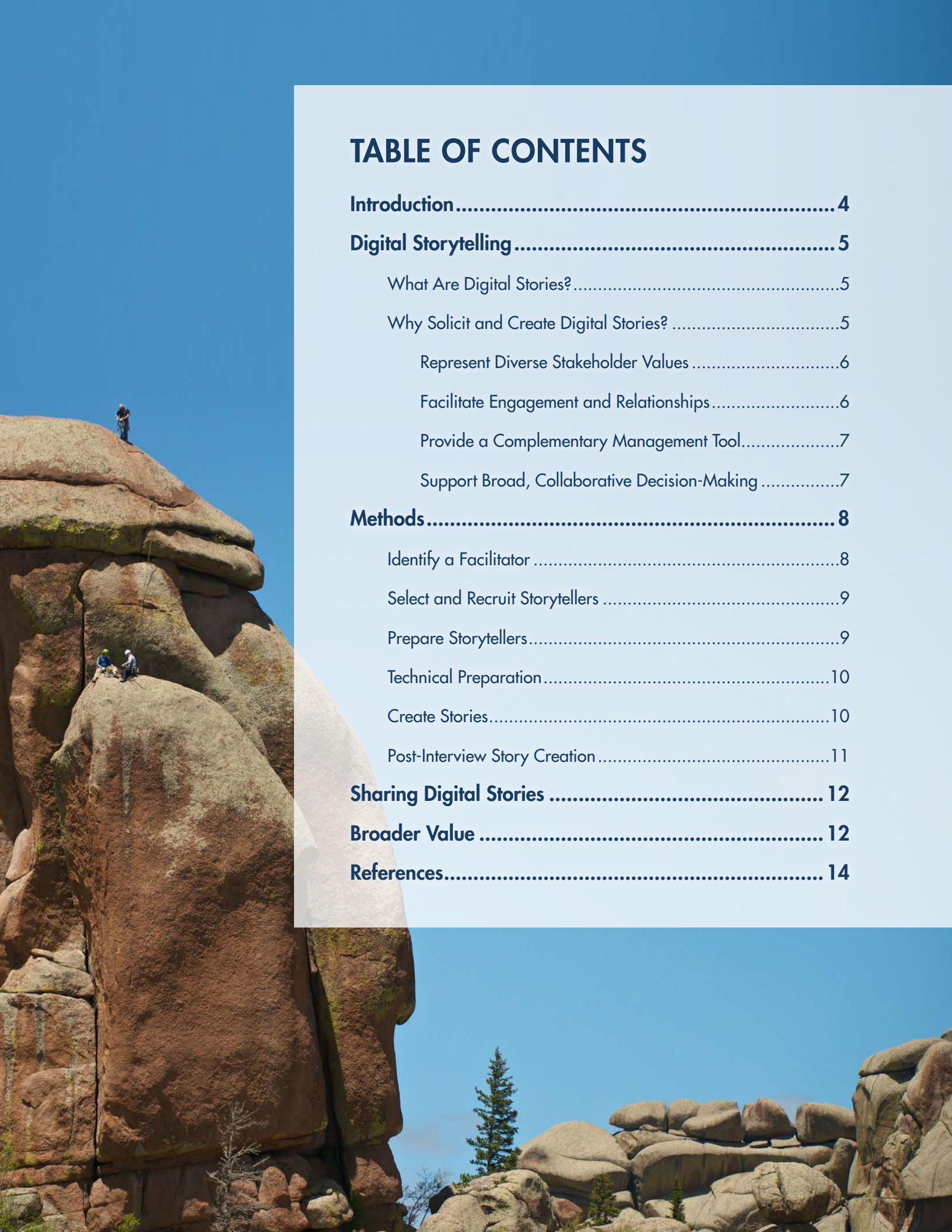


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INTRODUCTION

Public land management increasingly warrants novel approaches for engaging communities and the public. Digital storytelling is an emerging tool that can support collaborative and sustainable management of public lands. This toolkit provides a source of information and a guide for land managers interested in using digital storytelling to engage stakeholders. There is no single way to use the toolkit; land managers should adapt and apply these guidelines as they see fit.

Public lands, resource, and recreation managers operate amid conflicting objectives, increasing demands for access and use, and ecological uncertainty. These challenges have created a growing need for effective public collaboration in environmental management.ⁱ Collaboration constructively engages people to explore their differences and search for solutions beyond their own limited visions of possibilities.ⁱⁱ In collaborative management, agencies partner with the public as stakeholders throughout their decision-making process, including to develop alternatives and identify preferred solutions.ⁱⁱⁱ

Similarly, sustainable recreation as defined by the USDA Forest Service, provides “desirable outdoor opportunities for all people, in a way that supports ecosystems, contributes to healthy communities, promotes equitable economies, respects culture and traditions, and develops stewardship values now and for future generations.”^{iv}

For both collaboration and sustainable recreation, novel tools and methods can help explore, communicate, and manage toward humans’ place within their environments and on public lands. Platforms that engage communities and connect people to place can help land managers achieve their goals. Digital storytelling—a brief, first-person audio-video narrative method—is one such emerging approach, allowing stakeholders to share values on which to build for collaborative and sustainable land management.

This toolkit includes what digital stories are, what a land management agency could gain by using digital stories, instructions for creating digital storytelling projects, and the best practices for sharing stories.

VALUE OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING

FOR COLLABORATION

- Draws on local knowledge^{v,vi}
- Aims to educate the public^{vii}
- Incorporates public values into decision-making^{vi}
- Communicates diverse interests through authentic dialogue^{viii}

FOR SUSTAINABLE RECREATION

- Reinforces the idea that humans are part of nature^{ix,x}
- Aims to collaboratively engage communities^{xi}
- Highlights social, environmental, and economic aspects of sustainability^{xii}



Amy Nagler (Recreation Community that Saves Lives)

In this story, Amy Nagler shares her experience as a sweeper for the Laramie Enduro bike race in the Pole Mountain unit.

DIGITAL STORYTELLING

Storytelling is a process through which people come to better understand themselves, share information with their communities and social groups, and connect with cultural and historical narratives. As “a fundamental way of giving meaning to experience,” narrative provides individual and shared understandings of people, perspectives, and contexts, including those that may vastly differ from the storyteller’s or audience’s own.^{xiii} Stories can paint a picture of a community’s past, present, and future in a way that is both compelling and easily understandable.^{xiv}

What Are Digital Stories?

Digital stories are first-person narratives told in brief montages of video, image, music, sound, and voiceover. Digital storytelling is a simple, creative process that allows people with little or no experience to turn a personal story into a video.^{xv} Trained facilitators prompt participants to verbally share and record a story in an interview or story circle. Afterwards, participants directly or with the support of facilitators edit their recorded voiceovers into a digital story with a mix of both participant-provided and stock media content.^{xvi} Participants give feedback on drafts and final approval before publication of the digital stories.

This contemporary medium draws on classic elements of storytelling as a fundamental human means to “inform, educate, move, inspire, motivate, persuade, and represent powerful tools making embodied experiences explicit and accessible for reflection.”^{xvii}

At its core, digital storytelling supports people to share their stories and voices in a public space. While digital storytelling projects are often small-scale, online media platforms make them readily accessible to a broad audience.

Why Solicit and Create Digital Stories?

Digital storytelling can support public land management agencies in a variety of interrelated ways. Digital stories can represent diverse stakeholder values; facilitate engagement and relationships; provide a complementary management tool; and support broad, collaborative decision-making. Below is a summary of each benefit and tips on how to get the most out of each through stories.

EXAMPLE DIGITAL STORIES FOR PUBLIC LANDS

National Park Service Underground Railroad

<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/undergroundrailroad/multimedia.htm>

Historical and cultural interpretation of civil rights history in the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom program.

“Public Landemic” in Colorado

<https://publiclands.colostate.edu/2020/04/public-landemic/>

Online form invites participants to write stories and upload digital media about their recreation experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pole Mountain Gateways Digital Stories and StoryMap

<https://pole-mountain-gateways.wygisc.org/pages/storymap>

Stakeholders created digital stories about their experiences and values in the Pole Mountain Unit of the Medicine Bow Routt National Forest to support non-motorized trails planning.

Represent Diverse Stakeholder Values

Digital stories provide an accessible, virtual platform for representing and sharing the different ways people use public lands and recreation spaces. Storytelling allows people to collaboratively communicate interest over a position and move beyond a simple statement of their positions. These audio-visual narratives give people an opportunity to safely voice their opinions and can support members of specific user groups to feel represented in public lands processes. This can be uplifting for other members of that user group who may feel seen and heard by a story that represents their interests.

Additionally, digital stories can help viewers understand the complexity and breadth of public land uses and users' varied perspectives about those uses. They remind viewers that other storytellers and other users are real people living in a community, all of whom access public lands in both shared and different ways.

TIPS

- ✓ Select storytellers to represent the widest possible range of user groups. Broad representation helps to avoid the impression that decision-makers are only interested in a few uses portrayed in available stories.
- ✓ Additionally, aim for stories to inclusively portray other markers of diversity, including race, gender, ethnicity, ability, class, etc. in ways that avoid tokenizing participants.
- ✓ Avoid featuring stories portraying only well-known people in the local community to ensure many voices can be heard.

Facilitate Engagement and Relationships

Digital stories—through their open, personal narrative style—allow public land managers to engage and build relationships with the public in a new way. Storytelling can support managers to illuminate lesser known types of recreation and public land use. It can also communicate those uses as possible activities for future visitors to engage in.^{xvii}



Rex Lockman (Working and Recreating in Pole Mountain)

In this story, Rex Lockman shares his experiences working for the Laramie County Conservation District and recreating on Pole Mountain.



Garrett Geneux (A Place to Teach, A Place to Learn)

In this story, Garrett Geneux shares why he believes Vedauwoo offers a unique teaching environment and reflects on lessons the area has taught him.

TIPS

- ✓ Share digital stories with other partners, including federal and state agencies, to support shared stewardship and new ways to manage the landscape together.
- ✓ Ensure that incoming and newer managers can refer to digital stories for historical information to support decision-making.

Provide a Complementary Management Tool

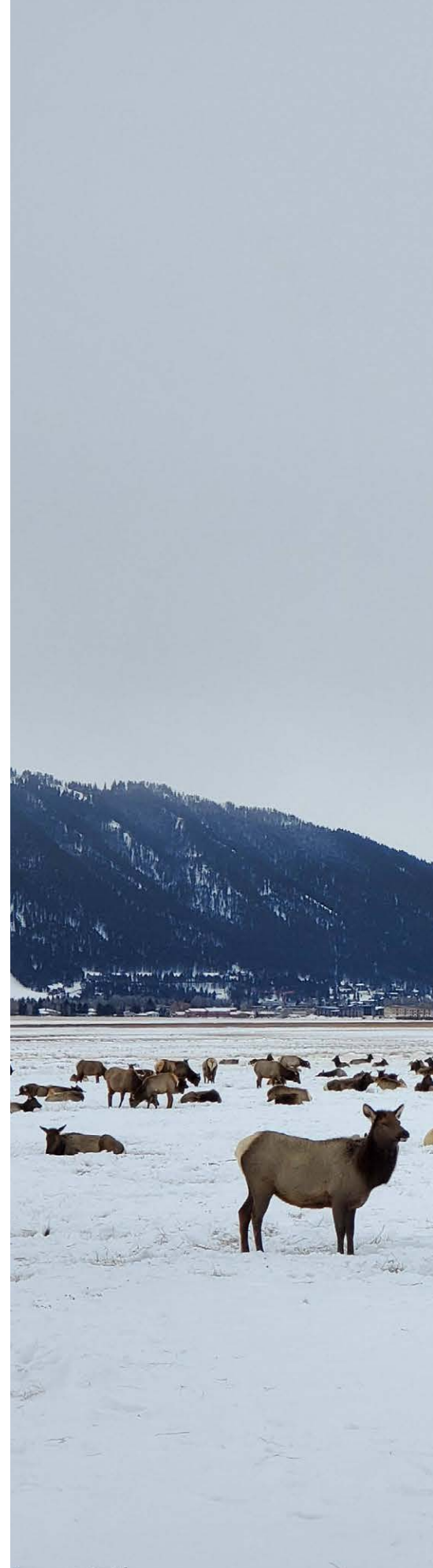
Digital storytelling provides a complementary approach within a suite of existing tools for collaborative management. Storytelling provides a novel platform for listening to stakeholders. By collecting stories, managers can shift their perspective from focusing on day-to-day issues to more deeply listening to and understanding stakeholders' feedback, suggestions, goals, and bigger picture needs.

TIPS

- ✓ Use digital stories to capture a collaborative project in progress instead of documenting a project once it has ended. This active approach helps with current and ongoing management decisions.
- ✓ Create a webpage to host digital storytelling projects. This helps to communicate the oral history and legacy of land management decision-making into the future.

Support Broad, Collaborative Decision-Making

Digital stories are most appropriate for broad, collaborative projects and decisions, especially those with multiple audiences, options, and potential outcomes. These narratives help when navigating complex decisions around ongoing issues that the public should be aware of. They can also help to find resolutions in decisions that may be emotionally charged. Instead of focusing on contention around a specific trail or narrow single issue, stories can communicate stakeholders' broad values in a landscape or place during collaborative projects.



TIPS

- ✓ Use digital stories for nuanced, public-facing decisions rather than internal management decisions, such as seasonal road closures.
- ✓ Also use this method for issues with an array of possible outcomes, like non-motorized trails planning or developing human-wildlife interaction outreach strategies. Avoid this method for issues with more discreet outcomes, such as timber-cutting, which may solely involve stakeholders who are either adamantly for or against the management decision.
- ✓ Digital storytelling may not contribute the “hard data” often perceived as necessary for informing decisions. Instead, use these emotional narratives to communicate the range and richness of stakeholders’ interests, supporting collaborative processes and flexible management actions.

METHODS

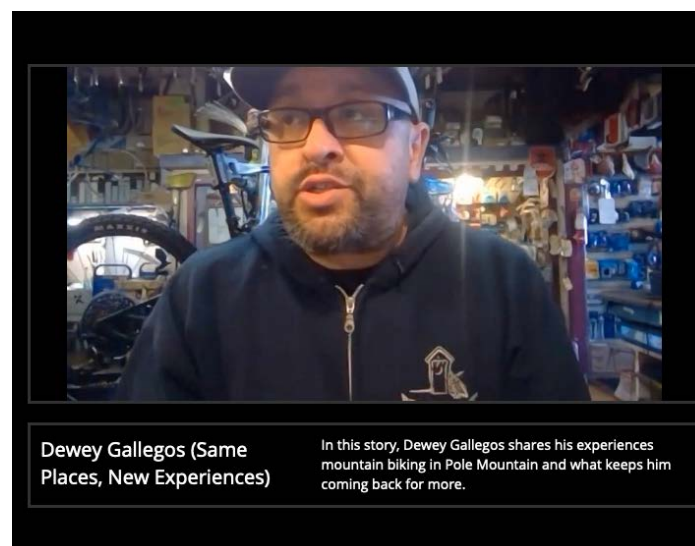
Digital storytelling projects can and will look very different depending on the topic, the stakeholders, and the location. The following process is highly adaptable across various contexts.

Identify a Facilitator

Once an agency decides to conduct a digital storytelling project to advance management goals, identify a person or group to facilitate the project and collect the digital stories. This could be:

- An agency employee who specializes in communication and has both interviewing and video-editing skills
- A university/college student or a part-time worker who is trained in both interviewing and video editing
- Third-party collaborative process practitioners who can provide these services as part of a larger project, such as the Ruckelshaus Institute in the case of the Pole Mountain Gateways digital storytelling effort
- A non-profit organization that specializes in digital storytelling, such as StoryCenter (see <https://www.storycenter.org/>).

The facilitator should follow the steps below to collect and create digital stories for the project. Note that creating digital stories can take several weeks or months of time depending on the scale of the project. Working with one of the non-agency partners listed above to identify stakeholders, solicit narratives, and produce final stories can help reduce the land managers’ workload.

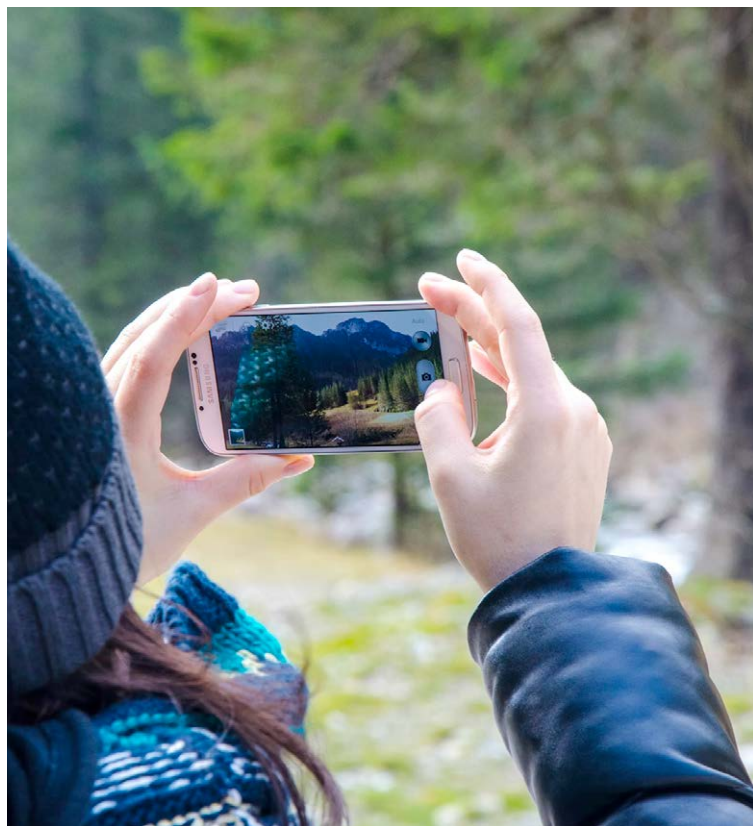


Select and Recruit Storytellers

- Select participants across a range of user groups (e.g., hiking, biking, grazing, motorized recreation) who may be willing to share their stories in this format.
- When selecting participants, be very intentional that everyone understands the scope of the project. Their stories should be relevant to the project's goals and intent.
- Invite each storyteller by email to an interview via an online video conferencing platform (e.g., Zoom), or, as appropriate, a live setting that supports recording. Inform each participant that they will share a personal story about their experiences with and values surrounding the specific project and place.
- Provide a consent and release form for participants to both tell and eventually publicly share their stories. The facilitator should stress that each participant ultimately owns their story and should not feel compelled to share the story if they are in any way uncomfortable doing so.

Prepare Storytellers

- Ask each storyteller to think in advance about—or even write out—a two to three minute story about an experience they have had in the specific land area or something that they value about that place.
- Help them to narrow their story by focusing on a character, adventure, accomplishment, place, job/career, relationship, recovery, or discovery experience.
- Share a sample digital story, like those referenced in this toolkit, to help them understand the medium.
- Recommend the participant practice telling their story with friends, family, colleagues, etc. before the session.



EXAMPLE INTERVIEW PROMPTS FROM THE POLE MOUNTAIN GATEWAYS PROJECT

- Can you talk about your experiences and connection with the Pole Mountain area?
- Please talk about your professional, personal, and recreational experience in the area.
- What kind of recreation or other activities do you engage in within these areas?
- What do you value about these trails/areas?
- What are your needs, concerns, and/or hopes for trails management in the Pole Mountain area?



Evan O'Toole (Finding a Future in Recreation)

In this story, Evan O'Toole talks about finding a love for Pole Mountain that led to him starting the Laramie Mountain Bike Series.



Abigail Whitman (Skiing to a Stronger Self)

In this story, Abigail Whitman reflects on her experience growing up around the Pole Mountain area and how cross-country skiing has impacted her life.

Technical Preparation

- Note that stories can be created in-person or online. In either case, provide or ask the storyteller to use headphones or another high-quality microphone for the video conference/storytelling recording session.
- Suggest the storyteller use a well-lit room with a light source in front of or facing them. Natural light from a window may also be effective. The participant should avoid backlighting that creates a silhouette and side lighting that emphasizes shadows and glares.
- Recommend the storyteller select a video background photo or put other equipment (e.g., skis) in the background that relates to their story, if possible.

Create Stories

- Meet with the storyteller at the agreed-upon time and venue and ask for permission to begin recording audio and video.
- Ask the participant to introduce themselves and discuss their professional and personal experiences with, connection to, and what they value about the land area.
- Focus on the specific topics of interest for this particular storytelling project and management issue (e.g., non-motorized trails planning, wildlife interactions, a specific land area).
- Finally, ask them to tell their brief (2-3 minutes) story about their experiences.
- Close by requesting the participant share any personal pictures, videos, music, etc. to help create their digital story.

Personal photos and video clips are more impactful than stock images alone and support first-person narratives in the storytellers' own words and images.

Post-Interview Story Creation

- Using a video-editing software, such as weVideo or iMovie, edit elements of each participant’s interview and their brief narrative together with any personal media they provided to create a digital story.
- Draw on stock photos, sound, and video of relevant uses and recreation activities to supplement personal media.
- Create an opening slide featuring the story title and storyteller’s name and role. At the end of the story, credit images and sound provided by the participant, other photographers, or open access materials and include a final closing slide with the project title.
- Ask each storyteller to review and provide feedback on their draft digital story for editing. The participant should provide final approval when the story appropriately captures their first-person narrative.^{xviii}



The Pole Mountain Gateways Project StoryMap anchors digital stories to specific places in the unit.

Home Storymap

View Data

View Digital Stories

These audio-visual narratives are part of a research and outreach project aiming to illustrate Pole Mountain user values. Please check back regularly for new stories. You can also share your own mini-story using the link below, and the Pole Mountain Gateways team will add your story to the digital story map.

[Submit your Digital Story](#)

Volunteering for Future Generations of Recreation
from Ruckelshaus Institute

03:45

Ken Cramer
(Volunteering for Future Generations of Recreation)

In this story, Ken Cramer shares his experience recreating in the Pole Mountain area and volunteering to preserve the forest for future generations.

SHARING DIGITAL STORIES

To spatially communicate stories across a landscape, agencies may integrate them into platforms such as ArcGIS StoryMap. This anchors stories to specific places by allowing viewers and managers to “see” where the stories took place on an interactive map. This approach fulfills the full potential of a *story* map, truly incorporating narratives beyond typical user-sourced spatial methods and data. Integrated digital storytelling and story mapping provide stakeholders—both those who are sharing stories and those who are viewing stories—with the opportunity to deeply reflect on and connect with places they value, thereby potentially facilitating shared stewardship. ^{xviii}

Broader Value

This toolkit outlines a procedure for public land managers to create digital stories. These unique, first-person narratives can share and communicate public lands values with broader audiences. Communicating these shared values through digital stories can provide a foundation on which to build collaborative and other management processes and provide managers valuable insight. Stories explain and highlight the richness of stakeholders’ desires and provide managers with added flexibility in applying management actions that meet agency objectives while satisfying those stakeholders’ interests. Stories integrated into a story map provide participants sharing stories and those viewing the stories the opportunity to reflect on the places important to them. Integrated digital storytelling and story mapping allows viewers to relate to other people’s values in shared landscapes, and, in turn, potentially encourage shared stewardship and sustainable management of that landscape.



OTHER WAYS TO SHARE DIGITAL STORIES

- The story belongs to the storyteller, first and foremost. Give participants a file or link to their story so they can share it through their own social media or directly with friends, family, and colleagues.
- Create a collection on Vimeo, YouTube, or another streaming service.
- Integrate digital storytelling into social media platforms and other messaging.
- Show stories during public meetings and outreach events.
- Use digital stories to prompt discussion in collaborative processes.



Nancy Bath (Generations of Knowledge)

In this story, Nancy Bath shares her experience continuing her family's work running cattle on the Crow Creek Allotment.

This toolkit was supported by the Tom and Debbe Spicer Gift for Collaborative Solutions and developed from the Pole Mountain Gateways Digital Stories and StoryMap project with the US Forest Service in southeast Wyoming. Learn more about that work at <https://pole-mountain-gateways.wygisc.org/pages/storymap> or in Budowle, R., Sisneros-Kidd, A.M., Stefanich, L., & Smutko, L.S. (2022). Narratives of place: Integrated digital storytelling and story-mapping for sustainable recreation. *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, 40(1), 154-175. <https://doi.org/10.18666/JPra-2021-10985>

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