2026 APA Colorado Honor Award Newsletter

The award recognizes a planning process that asked a difficult question: How can a community protect an ecologically important landscape while continuing to provide meaningful opportunities for people to experience it?

North Star is a 250-acre preserve east of Aspen, where the Roaring Fork River, wetlands, wildlife habitat, and recreation converge. The preserve is home to more than 192 plant species, 95 bird species, 12 mammal species, an 8,000-year-old fen, and important elk and deer migration corridors. It is also one of the most popular paddleboarding destinations in the area, with 8,000 to 9,000 summer visitors.

As recreation increased throughout the years, so did concerns about crowding, parking, wildlife disturbance, habitat impacts, and the changing character of the visitor experience. Years of monitoring showed many ecological indicators remained stable or improved. So, the challenge was to correct misinformation and address real pressures without dismissing perceptions.

The updated plan, adopted by the Pitkin County Board of County Commissioners in March 2026, builds on decades of management, monitoring, and community involvement. More than 28 resource studies informed the plan, and the Interagency Visitor Use Management Framework translated this information into desired conditions, measurable indicators, and management thresholds. The approach demonstrates how a framework typically associated with larger protected areas can be adapted to strengthen resilience and sustainable recreation on local open spaces.

The plan also reflects extensive, diverse, and inclusive community participation, including a working group comprising conservation organizations, landowners, government agencies, commercial operators, educators, neighbors, and river users. Field surveys, an open house, public questionnaires, and other outreach generated more than 1,300 public comments and helped build support for a community-informed management approach.

The result is an implementable management framework that puts conservation values first while continuing to provide carefully managed public access. Seventy-seven percent of the preserve remains closed to public access to protect sensitive habitat and wildlife corridors. Public use is concentrated both temporally and spatially: use is limited to dusk to dawn, avoiding peak wildlife use, and confined to 5% of the total area. Measurable thresholds for river crowding, parking, and ecological conditions provide clear benchmarks for evaluating results and guiding future decisions, particularly during peak-use periods.

The plan also recognizes that resilience requires management to evolve as conditions change. Rangers, naturalists, scientists, and partners will continue to monitor environmental and recreational conditions, evaluate them against established thresholds, and adapt management as new information becomes available.

For the project team, the award recognizes the many people who contributed to this work and the value of planning processes that integrate science, community experience, collaboration, and implementation. North Star demonstrates that conservation and public access do not have to be opposing goals. Through clear priorities, shared information, measurable outcomes, and a commitment to adapt, the plan strengthens the community's ability to care for an ecologically important landscape while keeping people meaningfully connected to it. Its transparent, scalable approach offers a model for other communities facing similar environmental and recreational pressures.