Ensuring the Sustainability of Urban Greenspaces: Mt. Kessler Greenways

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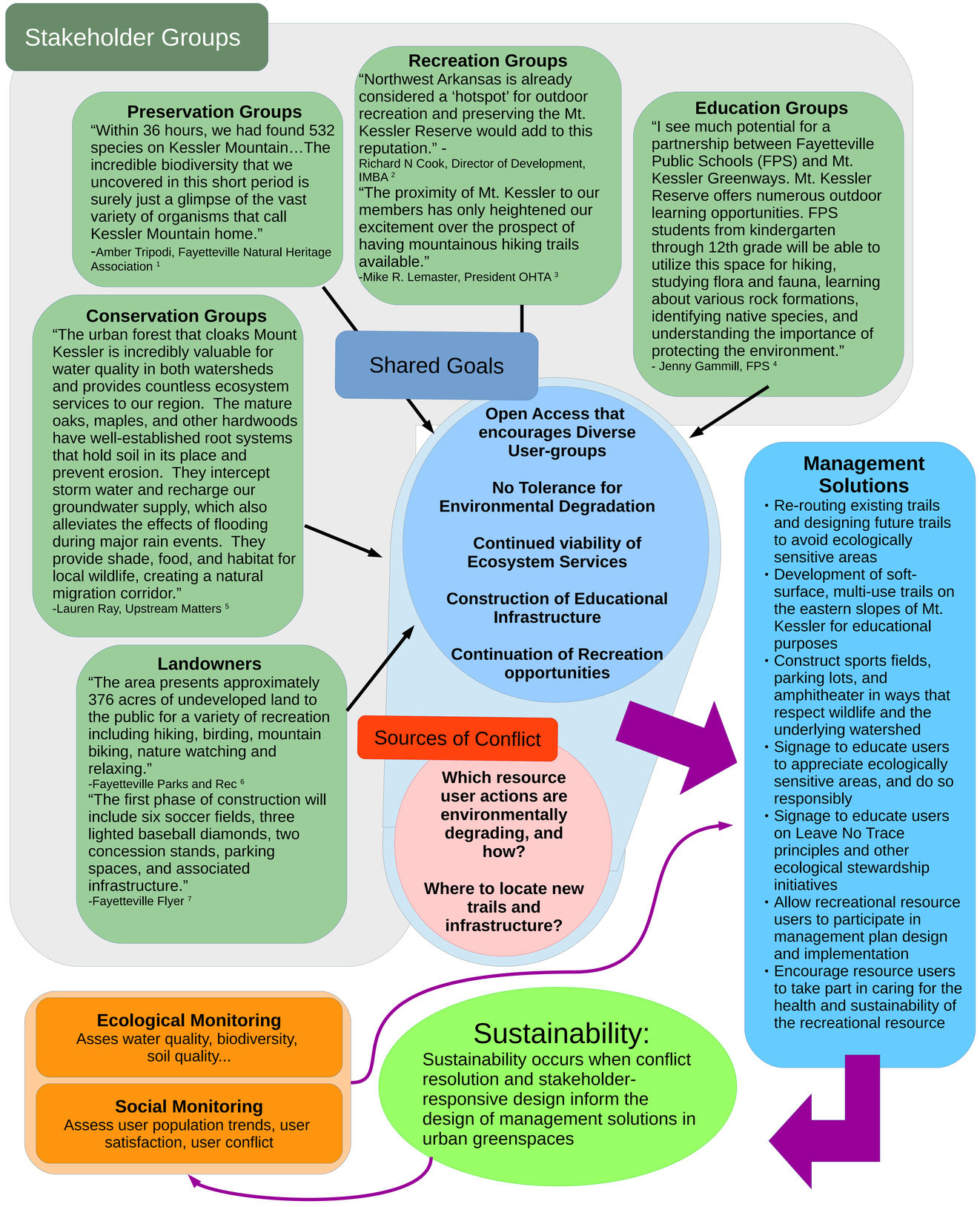
THE PROBLEM

The Mt. Kessler area has been recognized for its ecological uniqueness since the 1920's, and had been used as a recreational resource since the 1980's, when local mountain bikers began developing trails. In February of 2014, multiple stakeholders purchased the Mt. Kessler property on behalf of the City of Fayetteville, in order to establish the property as a public park and ecological reserve. Since that time, the City has been engaging 18 stakeholder groups and members of the public in order to develop a "master plan" for the Mt. Kessler property. Each of these stakeholder groups has a distinct set of core values, and these values translate to potentially conflicting visions as to how the Mt. Kessler property should be managed.

Mt. Kessler can be understood as a Social-Ecological-System, or SES. An SES is a type of resource that can be described in terms of the complex interaction between resource users (understood in social terms), and the resource itself (understood in environmental terms). Elinor Ostrom's SES framework divides SESs into four units: the resource system itself, resource units, resource users, and a governance system. In order to assess the sustainability of an SES, Ostrom argues that we must first understand the complex relationships between these four parts of the system. We can then craft institutions which relate to actions that reinforce central sustainability goals.

THE PROJECT

How can we design institutions that sustain Mt. Kessler Greenways, while respecting the diverse values, goals and activities of resource users?



THE OUTCOME

Applying the SES framework helps categorize the ways individuals and groups relate to the geographical and social landscape of Mt. Kessler. Then, I categorized these stakeholders into broad groups. Next, I researched what goals and central values these groups held. Then, I could sort these goals into shared visions and potential sources of conflict. These ideals help inform the development of a management plan for Mt. Kessler Greenways. Once this management plan is enacted, we must make sure to consistently monitor the health of the resource, and can make management adjustments as necessary.

SUSTAINABILITY

Recreational resources are an interesting topic of study because they are one point at which the social world meets the environmental world. In many cases, urban greenspaces such as Mt. Kessler are one of the primary ways people in urban areas get to connect with the natural world. This is why ensuring the sustainability of places like Mt. Kessler is of utmost importance.

This project gave me a chance to apply philosophical and sociological concepts to a real-world example in our own backyard. Interpreting the various stakeholders' goals was informed by philosophical studies on various concepts of environmental valuation. My research in environmental sociology helped me construct a model that employed aspects of Common-Pool Resource management, Social-Ecological-Systems, and the Institutional Analysis and Development framework. I was able to take these concepts out of the classroom, and apply them to a current and local case study.

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