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Is Forest Recreation on Public or Private Property?¹

A Research Brief in the IRIS Series²

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² The Internet Research Information Series (IRIS) is an internet accessible science report series covering outdoor recreation statistics (RECSTATS), natural lands research (NATLAND) and other human-dimension and demographics research (DEMOSTATS) related to natural resources. This research is a collaborative effort between the USDA Forest Service's Southern Research Station and its Forestry Sciences Laboratory in Athens, Georgia; the University of Georgia in Athens; and the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Tennessee.

<http://warnell.forestry.uga.edu/nrrt/nsre/IrisReports.html>

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(IRIS Research Brief 12/15/11)

The Research

The table below shows percent and millions of recreation activity days estimated to occur on public and private forests. The source of these estimates is the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment (NSRE) as reported in a recent Renewable Resources Planning Act Assessment publication (Cordell, forthcoming). Respondents to this survey were asked to indicate which of 26 activities listed they had participated in and whether the activity identified had occurred in areas that were primarily forested. If primarily forested, the respondent was then asked if the areas were publicly or privately owned. All the percentages and total annual days were calculated on the basis of what the activity participant understood about the settings and ownership.

Findings

As presented in Table 1, total days of *forest-based* activities at recreation and historic sites (family gatherings, picnicking, visiting historic or prehistoric sites, and camping) are relatively small compared with viewing and photographing nature. However, percentage of days on which recreation or historic sites on private forests were visited are substantial in both the East and the West Regions of the U.S. The percentage of visits on public forest lands was higher in the West than in the East, 69 versus 60 percent, respectively.



Canoeing publicly-owned forested portions of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, borderlands between Georgia and Florida. Viewing and photographing nature is often a primary reason for canoeing the Okefenokee. (Photo by Ken Cordell 2008).

Land-based activities making up viewing and photographing nature include viewing and photographing birds, natural scenery, other wildlife (besides birds), wildflowers, trees, etc. In both regions, days of participation in these activities on forested lands occurred more on public properties (55 percent in the East and over 60 percent in the West). Because of much larger population numbers in the East, there were about three times as many activity days for this activity group than in the West.

Backcountry activities include backpacking, day hiking, horseback riding on trails, mountain climbing, and visiting a wilderness or primitive area. Generally, this grouping of land-based activities had participation that was about one-tenth that of viewing and photographing nature. In both the East and West, around three-fourths of backcountry activity days occurred on public lands where access is more easily gained and where there are typically more miles of trails.

Motorized land activities include off-road vehicle driving and snowmobiling. Nationally there are an estimated nearly 1.5 billion activity days of motorized land activities. An estimated 46 percent of this activity in the East occurs on public lands compared to 59 percent in the West.

The hunting activity group includes big-game and small-game hunting. Nationally, the estimate for activity days of these hunting activities is about 482 million. This is between one and two percent of the number of activity days of viewing and photographing nature. In the East, close to 43 percent of hunting occurs on public forest lands; in the West, almost 57 percent occurs on public lands.

Finally, cross-country snow skiing is small in numbers of activity days relative to other activity groups. But like most of the other activity groups, the estimated days of participation indicate the importance of public lands as a resource for recreation activity. In the East 57 percent and in the West 67 percent of cross country skiing is estimated to occur on public lands. As earlier stated, public lands as referenced here include all public lands at all levels of government.

Private lands, as referenced in Table 1, include any privately-owned forest lands (non-governmental) where survey respondents participated in any of the 26 activities listed in the NSRE. These private forest lands could be corporation, non-governmental organization or family ownerships. In the East, days of activity on private land across the six activity groups in Table 1 ranges from a low of 28 percent for backcountry activities to a high of 57 percent for hunting. The estimates also show that over half of motorized land activities in the East occur on private lands. In the West, where there is proportionately less private land, between 22 percent and 43 percent of days of activity occurred on private lands (backcountry and hunting activities, respectively). In the West, the percentage of motorized activity on private forest land (41 percent) was almost as large as the percentage of private land hunting days (43 percent). The Number of motorized and of hunting days on private lands in the East was about 6 times that of the West.

Table 1—Percent and number of annual activity days on public and private properties, East and West 2005-2009.

Activity Group	East					West					Nation	
	Public		Private		Total Annual Days	Public		Private		Total Annual Days		Total Annual Days
	%	Days	%	Days		%	Days	%	Days			
Visiting recreation & historic sites	60	1,640	40	1,106	2,746	69	785	31	347	1,132	3,877	
Viewing/photographing nature	55	14,881	45	12,030	26,911	61	5,189	39	3,299	8,488	35,399	
Backcountry activities	72	1,897	28	743	2,640	78	1,008	22	290	1,298	3,938	
Motorized activities	46	566	54	665	1,231	59	155	41	107	262	1,493	
Hunting	43	169	57	225	394	57	50	43	38	88	482	
Snow skiing	57	12	43	9	21	67	9	33	4	13	34	

Source: NSRE 2005-2009 (n=5,374). Note: Annual days are in millions and include land-based activities only.

Observation

The United States is blessed with a legacy of public lands endowed by conservation champions such as Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot. Perhaps we as United States citizens don't always think about how lucky we are to have this legacy and to be able to go onto and use these public lands for our favorite outdoor recreation activities. Responsible stewardship of these lands is the charge of the local, state and federal agencies legislatively or otherwise assigned this stewardship. However, public land stewardship seems more challenged now than in the past as agency budgets are being trimmed. As increasing areas of private land, especially forested private land are converted to developed or other intensive uses, public land in all likelihood will become more important. Providing professional and fiscal resources for stewardship and continuation of public land ownership is an ever increasingly important policy issue for this country.

Reference

Cordell, H. Ken. (2012). *Outdoor recreation trends and futures: a technical document supporting the Forest Service 2010 RPA Assessment*. Gen. Tech. Rep. SRS-150. Asheville, NC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Southern Research Station. 167 p.