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Outdoor Trends in the North Region¹

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>

Outdoor Trends in the North Region

The Research

An assessment of outdoor recreation trends in the North Region of the U.S. was developed for the Northern Forest Futures Project, a joint venture of the U.S. Forest Service, the Northeastern Area Association of State Foresters, and the University of Missouri (<http://nrs.fs.fed.us/futures/>). This recreation trends assessment for the North is largely based on the Forest Service's national 2010 Renewable Resources Planning Act (RPA) Assessment of forest and range lands (<http://www.fs.fed.us/research/rpa/>). The recreation portion of the RPA is done by the Athens Research Group using participation data are from the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment (NSRE). The resources data used in the recreation portion are from various sources assembled for the 2010 RPA Assessment.

The Northern Forest Futures Project (NFFP) was undertaken to take a close look at the condition and to forecast the likely future of forests and associated resources and land uses in the North region. This IRIS Research Brief summarizes findings from the recreation trends assessment done for the NFFP and underscores the importance of these trends in considering natural resources policy for the future (Cordell, Betz, Mou, and Gormanson, forthcoming).

Recreation Participation

A region's level of recreation participation is in large part determined by the size of that region's population. Total population in the North (see Figure 2 map below for states included) is larger than in any other U.S. region at over 125 million. But, the North's population grew at less than half the rate from 1990 to 2009 than the rate in any other region. Age trends have been dramatic with Northern Baby Boomers (age 44 to 64) dominating all other ages in percent growth, while ages 25-34 declined nearly 17 percent. The North's growth rate of people age 65+ was less than one-half that of the other regions, suggesting that many people are choosing to retire elsewhere. The projected North population growth rate of 26 percent by 2060 is less than half that of any of the other three U.S. regions.

Nevertheless, the North’s population is growing in numbers and diversifying rapidly. With this diversification and changes in many other factors, a clear trend is emerging. That trend is that what people now choose to do for outdoor recreation is different from choices made by and available to previous generations. For example, fishing and hunting, often considered traditional and widely popular, are slowly being replaced by other activities, such as wildlife or bird watching and photography. Given that the population growth rate is somewhat lower in the North relative to other regions, the rate of growth between 1999 and 2009 for both the total number of outdoor recreation participants (+3.5%) and total annual activity participation days (+24%) were less than those of the Nation (Figure 1).

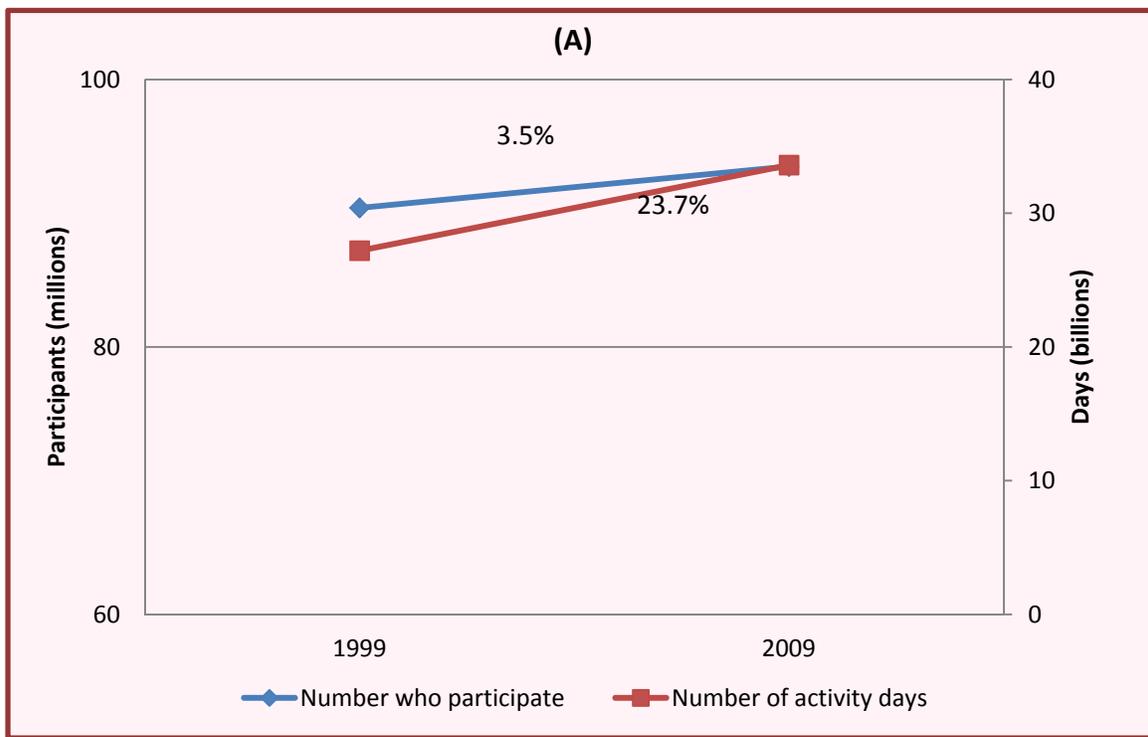


Figure 1—Growth in the number of participants and the number of participation days in 60 outdoor recreation activities in the North Region, 1999 to 2009

Based on our analysis of the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment, we found that the North’s most popular activities (each with >30 million participants) were walking for pleasure, family gatherings outdoors, gardening or landscaping, viewing/photographing natural scenery, visiting outdoor nature centers, and picnicking. Other popular activities growing over the last decade include visiting a beach and several viewing/photographing nature activities (birds, wildlife, wild flowers, etc.). Activities involving viewing and photographing nature have been among the fastest growing of

all activities nationally and in all regions. Other fast-growing activities, although with fewer participants, include off-highway vehicle driving, warm water fishing, kayaking, and snowboarding. Among activities that posted declines are camping, river rafting, downhill skiing, cross country skiing, and mountain biking.



Kayaking is a moderately fast growing activity in the North Region (Photograph by Ken Cordell 2008)

Associated with the NSRE, is the National Kids Survey. Based on recent data from this survey, our analysis revealed that 34 percent of youth age 6-19 in the North indicated they had spent *more* time outdoors this year than last year, while only 17 percent indicated they had spent *less* time outdoors this year. Unstructured free play ('hanging out') and a group of activities including biking, jogging, walking, and skateboarding were the leading activities. Nature-based recreation activities, such as attending organized camps, swimming, wildlife viewing, and hiking, also had substantial participation rates, but much less than the leading ones.

Recreation Resources Now

Less than 3 percent of the total area of the North Region is Federal land. Of this, most is open to the public for recreation. Only a very small proportion of this Federal land is officially designated as Wilderness. However, significant mileages on this land are designated as National Wild and Scenic Rivers and as National Recreation Trails (for example, see Table 1). National Recreation Trail mileage in the North is more than one-third of the national total. In addition to federal lands, state park systems are major recreation providers in the Region, comprised of nearly 5.2 million acres. This indicates generally that most of the Region's residents have a state park property within a one-hour drive. Also, local governments play an especially important role in providing recreation opportunities in this region. Nearly half of the nation's local government recreation agencies are in the North Region, some of which are specifically managed for conservation and compatible nature-based recreation. Examples are Wisconsin County Forests and Illinois Forest Preserves.

Table 1—Number and miles of National Recreation Trails in the North Region and Nationwide, 2004 and 2009

RPA region	Number			Miles		
	2004	2009	% change	2004	2009	% change
North	226	312	38.1	4,119	7,319	77.7
U.S.	898	1,077	19.9	13,288	20,220	52.2

Source: American Trails, National Recreation Trails Database. <http://tutsan.forest.net/trails/>.

Because the Region's population is large, but overall public acreages modest, residents of the North have access to less than two-tenths of an acre of Federal and state land per person. The pattern of Federal and state land within 75 miles of residents' home counties is shown in Figure 2. (The distance of 75 miles is roughly equivalent to the distance residents might travel to visit these public lands, there and back in the same day). The greatest water area (non-ocean) per capita is in counties located near the Great Lakes and in the northernmost counties across the Region. Non-Federal forest is more plentiful along the Appalachian Mountains, in southern Illinois, across much of Missouri, in Great Lakes counties, and in the most northern of counties relative to other areas of the Region.

Recreation Resources in the Future

Possible future availability of public land and water resources per capita were assessed using projections of population growth. Because of population growth by 2060, per-capita Federal and state park land and water area is projected to decrease to about 79 percent of the 2008 level. Total non-Federal forest land area is projected to change with continuing conversions from forests and farmlands to cities and suburbs, thus declining to 74 percent of the 2010 level.

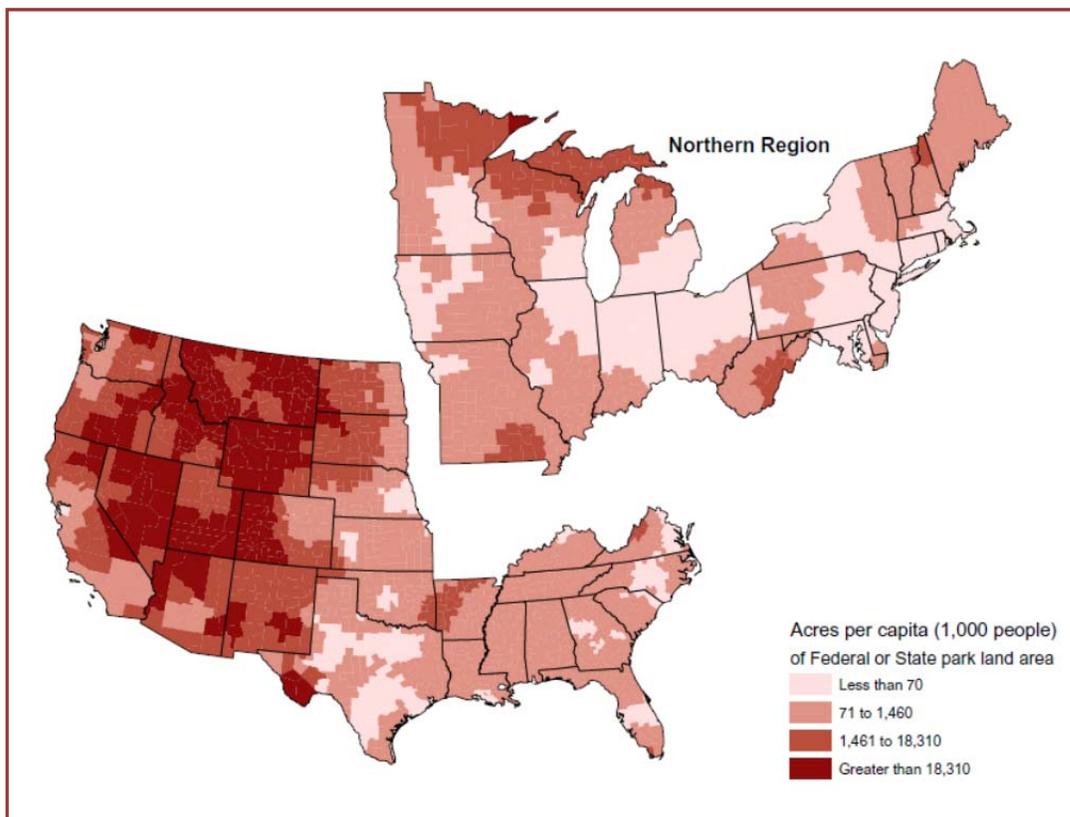


Figure 2—Acres per 1,000 people of Federal and state park land area within a 75-mile recreation day trip of each North Region county, 2008.

Sources: U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service 2008; U.S. Department of Interior National Park Service 2008; U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management 2008; Tennessee Valley Authority 2008; U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 2006; National Association of State Park Directors 2009.

Observation

Population and recreation resource trends are headed in directions that raise many questions about recreation opportunities for Northerners in the future. If the people of this Region continue to

be interested in outdoor recreation and in spending time in nature, how will there be sufficient opportunities for them to satisfy these interests? Some may have the resources to purchase their own recreation land, but it is highly likely that many, perhaps most, will not. With downward pressures on local, state and Federal land management budgets, one cannot help but wonder what role public lands will be able to play in meeting future demand. There is general agreement that access to outdoor places and experiencing nature are good things to have and to provide. But while there are more and more people every year, the outdoor spaces and places pie continues to grow smaller. Will future residents of the North have reasonable and affordable access to outdoor recreation venues? This is a major policy question facing all levels of government, and all regions, not just the North. It is to their credit that many private and public individuals and organizations have worked hard to create and nourish the America's Great Outdoors Initiative. Hopefully this sweeping Initiative will keep this type of broad policy question visible and can help stimulate actions to address the need for outdoor opportunities for the future.

Reference

Cordell, H. Ken; Betz, Carter J.; Mou, Shela H.; Gormanson, Dale. (2012). Outdoor recreation in a shifting northern societal landscape. Gen. Tech. Rep. NRS-100. Newtown Square, PA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Northern Research Station. 74 p.