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# Recent Outdoor Recreation Trends<sup>1</sup>

A Research Brief in the IRIS Series<sup>2</sup>

January, 2012

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<sup>1</sup> Athens Research Group, Southern Research Station, USDA Forest Service, Athens, GA (H. Ken Cordell, Project Leader).

<sup>2</sup> 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>

# Recent Outdoor Recreation Trends

## IRIS Research Brief

### The Research

The source of data for this IRIS Research Brief is the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment (NSRE). NSRE is a general population household telephone survey of Americans age 16 and older. The core of the NSRE is a set of questions that ask about participation in the last 12 months in a variety of outdoor recreation activities. The simple yes/no response data were weighted using a post-stratification process that adjusts the respondent age, sex, race, education and rural/urban residency profile so that it closely matches the U. S. population profile based on the U.S. Census of Population. The earlier data used here were collected during 2005 to 2009 and compared with later data collected between August 2010 and October 2011. Thirteen recreation activities were common in the versions spanning these two time periods (Table 1).

### Findings

For the U.S. population as a whole in the 2010-11 period, participation in *walking for pleasure* (almost 85 percent of them/us) and *family gatherings outdoors* (just over 74 percent) were the most widely popular activities. Participation rates for these activities had changed very little in recent years. Participation in swimming, diving and related activities and in sightseeing were both over 60 percent in the earlier 2005 - 2009 period, and along with viewing or photographing birds (41 percent in 2010-11), these were the three activities which had grown the fastest. *Participation in sightseeing increased 8.1 percent, followed by viewing birds (up 5.7 percent) and participating in swimming activities (up 4.8 percent).*



Swimming in a thermal pool on the southeast coast of Hawaii (Big Island), Hawaii (Photograph by Ken Cordell, 2010)

Other activities with increasing participation rates were *viewing or photographing other wildlife besides birds, boating, fishing, and snow/ice activities*. Participation rates for four activities appear to have decreased between 2005-09 and 2010-11. They include picnicking, bicycling, developed camping and primitive camping. The participation rate for picnicking showed the percentage-point decrease during this period, falling by more than 4.0 percent.

Table 1—Percent of U.S. residents of age 16 or older participating in selected outdoor recreation activities, 2007 and 2010-11.

Activity	Percent participating	
	2005-09 Period	2010-11 Period
Walking for pleasure	85.0	84.7
Family gatherings outdoors	74.0	74.4
Swimming, diving, etc.	61.3	66.1

Activity	Percent participating	
	2005-09 Period	2010-11 Period
Sightseeing	52.7	60.8
Viewing/photographing other wildlife	50.2	54.1
Picnicking	51.7	47.5
Viewing/photographing wild birds	35.7	41.4
Boating	35.5	38.2
Bicycling	37.5	35.6
Fishing	34.2	35.0
Snow/ice activities	24.9	26.6
Developed camping	23.8	21.7
Primitive camping	14.5	12.4

Note: Percentages represent annual participation rate estimates based on pooled NSRE data from the periods from 2005 to 2009 and from 2010 to 2011.

Source: NSRE 2005-2009 (n=30,398) and NSRE 2010-2011 (n=2,908).

(We urge caution in interpretation of these estimates of participation rates. These are, after all, estimates, and as in all surveys, estimates based on survey data are subject to various sources of bias.)

## Observation

No one could deny that the last several years have seen tremendous changes in the social, economic and environmental character of the United States, and world. The ethnic and cultural makeup of the U.S. population is different now than 10 years ago, and will be even more different in another 10 years. Our economic situation finds us in and out of recession and adjusting to it through shifting markets for labor, housing and other services and goods. As more land is developed and converted from natural conditions, as climate change progresses and as more demands are placed on our public lands, our environmental conditions will shift in response. Macro-changes such as these are sure to show up in recreation survey results as shifts in what the people of the U.S. chose as their favored outdoor activities shift. Some shifts are already evident in the above estimates of activity participation rates. Growth in participation for sightseeing, birding and wildlife watching is a trend that has been gaining momentum in recent years. This growth indicates rising interest in viewing and photographing the landscape and natural character of the U. S. The modest declines in participation in

some other activities may reflect many things. But, overall, they reflect shifts in the outdoor activity pallet of Americans. These shifts will need to be translated into changed priorities in the management of land, water and facilities for outdoor recreation, both public and private.