

Trends in Outdoor Recreation Participation

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INTRODUCTION

While past participation trends in outdoor activities are not perfect predictors of future trends, they are certainly among the more reliable of indicators of short-term future trends, such as over the next 5 years or even decade. Past research has clearly shown that trends have an enduring momentum that shows up as relatively slow and smooth transitions in the way people allocate their leisure. It is unlikely that participation in an activity such as downhill skiing would rise or fall drastically in the course of only one, or even across 5 years. The more usual type of trend is for participation in an activity to rise or fall gradually in number of participants, days of participation or number of trips people take over a number given period. Thus, looking at participation trends over a number of years usually gives us a reliable indication of the likely direction future participation trends will take. In this paper, we examine past participation trends as revealed by comparing participation estimates from the 1960, 1982-83 and 1994-95 National Recreation Surveys (Cordell et al, forthcoming). First, we look at the current situation and highlight the most popular land, water and snow/ice-based activities in America in the 1990s.

THE MOST POPULAR ACTIVITIES IN THE 1990S

The number of different days on which people participate in an outdoor activity is a good measure of an activity's overall popularity. Based on findings from the most recent National Recreation Survey, named the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment, NSRE, the outdoor activity with the highest mean number of days per participant was walking for pleasure or exercise with nearly 108 days per person during the 12-month period bridged by the NSRE between 1994 and 1995. Next in popularity among land-based activities were bird watching (88 days), biking (39), wildlife viewing (37), off-road driving (25), and horseback riding (24). The land-based activities with the lowest mean number of days per participant per year were caving (just over 2 days) and mountain climbing (4).

In terms of total days of participation across all participants in the U.S., the six land-based activities with over 1 billion activity days during the 1994-95 NSRE survey period included:

Walking—14.4 billion
Bird Watching—4.7 billion
Wildlife Viewing—2.3 billion
Biking—2.2 billion
Sightseeing—2.0 billion
Family Gatherings—1.1 billion

Among water-based activities, the one with the highest mean number of days per participant was surfing at over 30 days per year. Nearly as many days per participant were associated with pool swimming (28 days), visiting a beach or waterside (26 days), and studying nature near water (24). These relatively high levels of participation, in addition to large numbers of participants, resulted in these three activities being among the most popular water-based activities in the United States. The four water-based activities with the largest number of days of participation across the population of the U.S. are as follows:

Visiting a Beach or Waterside—3.2 billion
Swimming in Pools—2.4 billion
Studying Nature Near Water—1.4 billion
Swimming in Rivers, Lakes, Oceans—1.2 billion

Participants devoted many fewer days to boating and floating activities than to fishing, swimming and water-based nature viewing activities. Downhill skiing was the most popular of winter sports with over 126 million participation days in 1994-95.

LONG-TERM TRENDS

While number of days on which participants engage in outdoor activities is a good indicator of their relative popularity, survey design differences do not permit using days as the primary measure for tracking trends across the past National Recreation Surveys. In the tabulation that follows, number of people participating and the percentages of the population they represented are presented as a next best measure to total days of participation. Not all activities included in the most recent NSRE were included in the earlier National Recreation Surveys, so the comparisons shown are limited in scope. However, these activities do represent a good cross section of the historic outdoor recreation interests of the American public:

ACTIVITIES—MILLIONS OF PARTICIPANTS AND PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION (%)

ACTIVITY	1960	1983	1995
Swimming	61.3 (47)	99.7 (53)	118.0 (59)
Bicycling	13.0 (10)	60.2 (32)	63.3 (32)
Fishing	43.1 (33)	64.0 (34)	63.3 (32)
Camping	13.0 (10)	38.9 (21)	58.5 (29)
Snow skiing	2.6 (2)	16.9 (9)	26.2 (13)
Hunting	20.9 (16)	22.6 (12)	20.6 (10)
Horseback riding	11.7 (9)	16.9 (9)	16.2 (8)
Canoeing/Kayaking	2.6 (2)	15.0 (8)	17.5 (9)
Sailing	3.9 (3)	11.3 (6)	10.6 (5)

The first section of this short paper highlighted a number of recreational pursuits which are now highly popular among the outdoor recreation conscious American public. But, as the tabulation just above indicates, these activities have not always been highly popu-

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lar. Some were not even considered important enough to be included in that earliest 1960 National Recreation Survey. Driven by changes in tastes for recreational activities, the technologies that enable and make activities more enjoyable, and the kinds and growing abundance of places and facilities for participating in activities, it is obvious that American's recreation lifestyles have changed in very noticeable and dramatic ways in the 35 years between the first and last national surveys. Participant numbers for some activities have grown rapidly, e.g., bicycling, camping, swimming and snow skiing, while others have grown little or have even declined somewhat, namely horseback riding, hunting, and sailing. Based on the trends shown in the tabulation above, the following observations are offered:

- Consumptive activities including hunting and fishing remain somewhat popular, but their popularity is not growing. For hunting especially, strongly suspected reasons for lack of growth in popularity is the increasing difficulty of finding suitable areas for the activity and increasingly the negative image associated with hunting.
- Costly activities such as sailing and horseback riding are most likely not growing in popularity because of the costs and difficulty of having a horse, or a sailboat, and having suitable places to pursue these activities.
- Less expensive activities and those one can pursue close to home continue to be popular among many and are growing in popularity very rapidly among people discovering the activities for the first time. Bicycling and swimming are examples of these types of activities.
- Outdoor adventure activities, often with significant risks associated with participation, are rising in popularity, even though they can be costly. Canoeing/kayaking (especially in white water) and downhill skiing are good examples.

RECENT TRENDS

As we move rapidly toward the 21st Century, the following are the land, water and snow/ice based activities that have been growing fastest in number of participants 16 years and older in the United States since the 1982-83 National Recreation Survey:

- *Land-based activities:* bird watching (+155.2%), hiking (93.9%), backpacking (72.7), primitive camping (58.2), off-road driving (43.8), walking (42.8), sightseeing (39.5), and develop camping (38.3). All other land-based activities grew 15 percent or less in number of participants between 1982 and 1995.
- *Water-based activities:* motorboating (39.9), swimming in rivers, lakes or oceans (38.2), and swimming in pools (16.4). All other water-based activities grew in number of participants between 1982 and 1995 at less than 15 percent.
- *Snow/ice-based:* downhill skiing (58.5), snowmobiling (34.0), crosscountry skiing (22.6), and sledding (15.8).

CONCLUSION

Outdoor recreation trends help us to look into the short-term future. By comparing participation statistics between the previous

National Recreation Surveys, a number of trends can be observed. These trends indicate that the types of activities people pursue has been changing dramatically over the last 35 years and that outdoor recreation numbers have grown much larger than they were in the 1960s. Based on these trends, the outlook for the future is obviously continued growth with resultant increased demand for use of public lands and access to private areas, services and facilities. The activities people prefer and the way we recreate may change, but all indications are that outdoor recreation will remain a growth market in the United States.

LITERATURE CITED

Cordell, H. Ken, et al. Forthcoming in 1998. Outdoor Recreation Participation Trends. In Outdoor Recreation in American Life, H. Ken Cordell, Principal Investigator, Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, Sagamore Publications, Inc.