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## Assessment of Trails Resources

# TRAIL RESOURCES, USERS AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE UNITED STATES

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Trails represent perhaps the most important and varied class of recreation resource. Resources include paved jogging and bicycle trails, nature study trails, canoe routes, horse trails, and footpaths. Trails are used for hiking, skiing, snowmobiling, bicycling, and as access routes for other activities.

### Trail Resources

Over 2 million miles of primitive roads and trails exist on private lands open to the public. About half of these are on lands in the Northeast. Local governments manage almost 22,000 miles of trails across the country. About 55% of these are located in the Northeast, and about 26% in the South. States manage about 102,000 miles of trails. Over half of those state managed miles are in the Northeast, and over 1/3 are in the Southeast. Federal agencies manage about 160,00 miles of trails, mostly in the West. About 100,000 miles are on Forest Service, and about 42,000 on BLM lands.

### Trail Use and Users

In 1987, Americans took over 90 million trips for pleasure walking, 85 million day hiking trips, 81 million to observe wildlife, 13 million backpacking trips, 23 million horseback riding trips, 35 million nature study trips, 57 million off road driving trips, and 19 million canoeing/ kayaking trips. In all, Americans take over 900 million trips for trail recreation each year.

### Effective Trail Opportunity

The total trail miles in the eastern regions is greater, but the western regions have more effective opportunity; that is, trails that are effective in serving the public's needs. This is true for three reasons. First, the greater population in the East spreads the public resources more thinly. Second, there are more trail miles in the East and these resources have better access and information. Third, more access services exist in the West, especially guide and outfitter services.

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## Future Supply and Demand

If recent trends continue, the amount of trail resources will decline. Remote trail opportunities will decline as a result of road building activity. Additions to protected areas will not be sufficient to offset losses from road building. Road building will increase trail opportunities near roads on public lands, but these gains will be more than offset by losses in access to private lands from development and increased posting.

With these types of constraints, it is expected that the supply of trail recreation trips will increase by 65 to 77 percent, or about 650 million trips, in the next 50 years, depending on the trail environment (Table 1). Trail trip supply will rise slightly faster in non-motorized backcountry settings than in either wilderness or near road settings. Three activities will account for the majority of this increase: sightseeing (120 million more trips), day hiking (100 million more trips) and walking (80 million more trips).

The growth in use, coupled with the expected resource declines will have several implications for the future. Trail users can expect to encounter more people on their trips, regardless of the trail setting. This will put greater strain on the resources. Managers will have to become more adept at spreading use, and more concerned with carrying capacities of trail settings.

If demand for trail recreation were unconstrained by resource availability, it would rise even faster. The nonmotor backcountry setting would grow by 203% of present levels (331 million additional trips per year) by the year 2040, wilderness trips by 199.2 percent (121 million additional trips), and near road settings by 84.5 percent (416 million additional trips).

If past resource trends continue, there will be large gaps between the number of trail trips users wish to consume and the number they will be able to consume. For both non-motorized backcountry and near road settings, those gaps will be about 100 million trips per year by 2040 (Table 1). The gap in wilderness trail use will be at about 36 million trips per year. Some activity-setting combinations will have large gaps, but others will have no gap. This means that trail resources will grow enough that users can take as many trips as they want at 1987 cost levels.

The activity-setting combinations that will have the largest gaps are wilderness day hiking (12.3 million trip gap), nonmotor backcountry wildlife observation (16.7 million trip gap), nonmotor backcountry day hiking (40.1 million trip gap), and near road sightseeing (31.1 million trip gap). The size of these gaps indicates that the settings for these activities will need additional attention from managers and resource planners.

## Conclusions

Although the East has more total trail miles than the West, the trails that effectively serve residents are greater in the West, for two reasons. First, most of the trails in the East are on private lands, and are neither well marked nor well publicized. More trails in the West are on public lands, and are both better marked and publicized. Second, more of the urbanized areas in the West are close to large tracts of public lands with ample trail resources, so the public trail miles are more effective in serving the regional populace.

In general, future growth in trail resources is not expected to be sufficient to handle all the trips Americans want to take for trail recreation. Shortages of opportunities are expected to be acute for nonmotorized backcountry and near road settings, and particularly for wildlife observation, day hiking, sightseeing and photography.

Accurate information about the amounts of trail resources for many public and nearly all private providers is lacking. Optimally, available assessment data would include number and miles of trails by county, as well as number of access providers, such as guides, livery services and outfitters.

Hundreds of published maps and guidebooks exist, covering individual trails or geographic areas. These sources represent the most accurate data on trails available to the public, and possibly the only source for locally relevant trail data. Combining them into a national inventory of trails would be a useful albeit Herculean task, but something approaching this effort may be needed to get a definitive picture of the nation's trail resources.

Table 1.-- Miles of land trail resources, by ownership and region.

<u>Ownership</u>	<u>Region</u>				Total
	North	South (miles)	Rocky Mountain	Pacific Coast	
Federal:					
USFS	10,295 <sup>1</sup>	7,291 <sup>1</sup>	56,194 <sup>1</sup>	25,981 <sup>1</sup>	99,761
NPS	1,900 <sup>1</sup>	3,200 <sup>1</sup>	4,600 <sup>1</sup>	3,300 <sup>1</sup>	13,000
BLM	0	0	24,515 <sup>1</sup>	18,120 <sup>1</sup>	42,635
TVA	0	235	0 <sup>1</sup>	0 <sup>1</sup>	235
BREC	0	0	250 <sup>1</sup>	263 <sup>1</sup>	513
Total Federal	12,195	10,726	85,559	47,664	156,144
State <sup>2</sup>	56,507	37,847	2,118	5,288	101,760
Local	11,838	5,732	1,375	2,682	21,627
Private	1,081,000	760,000	300,000	121,000	2,262,000
Grand Total	1,161,540	814,305	389,052	176,634	2,541,531

SOURCE: National Outdoor Recreation Supply Information System (NORSIS), USDA-Forest Service, Athens, GA.

<sup>1</sup> Regional totals are estimates; national total from 1986 National Trails Assessment, National Park Service.

<sup>2</sup> State estimates were derived from average of miles reported to Presidents Commission on Americans Outdoors and National Association of Park Directors 1987 Annual Information Exchange. Data for states reporting to both sources were averaged and a regional ratio of trail miles to state recreation acres computed and applied to all states in the region.

NOTE: Fish and Wildlife Service does not have either data or estimates of miles of trails on its refuges. Corps of Engineers trail data include only number of trails. Estimates of the mileage of these trails is not available.