

Wildland Recreation Use Trends

by H. Ken Cordell, Ph.D. and George Siehl

Dramatic social change has been occurring in the United States. Our population has grown by 63 million people since the 1960s, but the rate of increase has slowed from 2 to less than 1 percent per year. A greater percentage of the population now lives in the South and West, and there has been increased migration to non-metropolitan communities. Average income continues to increase. Leisure increased at least up until the 1970s, but more recently the amount of leisure Americans have appears to be rapidly decreasing.

Between 1973 and 1988, the average number of hours of leisure fell about 37 percent. Harris (1984) identified increased numbers of women in the work force, longer commutes and longer hours on the job as major reasons. With less leisure, activities are increasingly centered closer to home, potentially influencing a dramatic change in wildland recreation.

New activities and developments have made it easier to engage in traditional wildland activities, but there have been equally impressive offsetting changes in home leisure technology. These changes have contributed to a trend toward more "at-home" activity. Added to the influence of these changes are the aging of the population, re-discovery of the family as the "baby boom generation" matures and bears children, and rapid development of electronic home-video entertainment.

We may expect to see many prominent changes in wildland recreation as a result of an interplay between technology, demographics, socioeconomic make-up, personal preferences,



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consumer-oriented marketing and aging. In the sections of this article which follow, the current situation and emerging future for wildland recreation are briefly examined. Most of the information presented was drawn from the 1989 Outdoor Recreation and Wilderness Assessment (Cordell, et al. 1989). Our observations about wildland recreation are followed by recommendations for improving its future for Americans.

Wildland Recreation in the 1980s

Widespread popularity. Driven by social change and the availability of wildland recreation opportunities, the people of the U.S. are exhibiting changes in participation patterns from those of just a few years ago. Currently, 89 percent of the U.S. population reports participation in some form of outdoor recreation. In 1987, Americans spent

some part or all of 28.2 billion personal days in outdoor recreational activities. The most popular activities, measured by the number of trips taken away from home, included:

	(Millions of trips)
Swimming outdoors	461
Driving for pleasure	421
Sightseeing	293
Walking for pleasure	267
Attending outdoor sports events	261
Warm water fishing	239
Motor boating	220

Of the approximately 4.6 billion outdoor recreation trips Americans took away from home in 1987, about 50 percent (some 2.25 billion) were taken to participate in wildland activities such as camping, canoeing/kayaking, fishing, hunting, hiking, horseback riding, bicycling, wildlife observation, winter skiing and visiting prehistoric sites. In general, among resource-dependent activities those which are physically demanding, involve risk and adventure, are educational or are equipment oriented have been growing fastest.

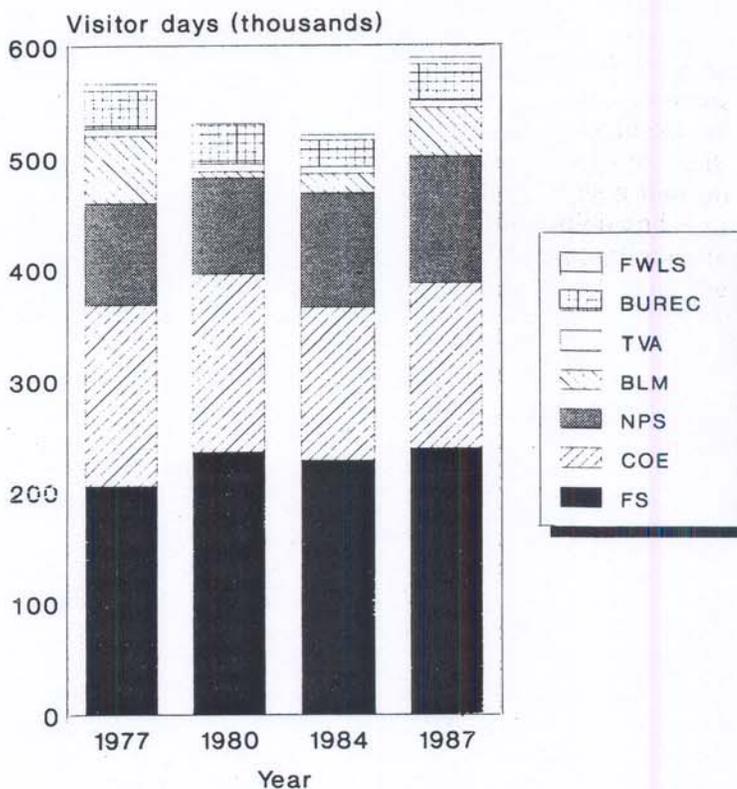
Uneven Participation. The participation statistics reported above indicate the tremendous popularity of outdoor recreation within U.S. society. But participation among segments of our society is not always evenly

spread. Wildland recreation mostly occurs on federal and state lands, and these lands mostly provide opportunities for young to middle-aged, able bodied, white individuals who are usually well educated with good incomes. Americans who are elderly, less educated, are racial minorities, are economically disadvantaged or disabled, and those living in cities have fewer opportunities and participate much less in wildland recreation than others. Identification and improvement of disproportionately available opportunities is a rising priority of the 1980s.

Recreation on Public Lands in the 1980s. Recent estimates developed for the RPA Assessment (Cordell, et al. 1989) indicate the relative proportions of wildland recreation which occurs on sites managed by each of the four major resource owners. These estimates show that federal lands receive an estimated 12 percent of all outdoor recreation participation, that state lands receive about 14 percent, that local recreation sites account for 60 percent and that private lands and enterprises provide about 14 percent.

The majority of areas managed by federal agencies are in wildland settings, some are predominantly water. Overall, the reported number of visitor days on these areas (a measure of total visitation time) increased 4.0 percent from 1977 to 1987. Although some agencies had slight declines in recreation use (Figure 1), visitor days of use at national

Figure 1--Recreational visitor days for federal land management agencies, 1977 to 1987



Source: *Annual Federal Fee Reports, USDI National Park Service, Washington, D.C.*

forest sites increased by over 16 percent. Also, while the number of total visitor days during this period was changing erratically, and rose only slightly past the 1977 level, the number of visits to some federal land systems increased much more rapidly. This

difference in growth rates between total visitor time on sites and number of visits reflects more visits, each of shorter duration. Visitors are traveling shorter distances per trip and staying for shorter lengths of time with each visit to federal

areas.

It appears that the pattern and growth of state recreation visitation has been fairly consistent over the past 10 years, with about nine of every 10 visitors making a day visit. Visitation has grown steadily since the 1970s. The length of stay for a day visit to a state recreation area is about three to four hours. Median one-way travel distance for day visitors ranges between 25 and 36 miles. For overnight visitors, median length of stay is a little over two days, while the mean length of stay is about 3.5 days.

Emerging Trends. Among the many trends emerging as we enter the 1990s are an increasing number of foreign visitors, the demise of the family vacation and a changing activity mix. First, the growth in tourism by foreign visitors has been dramatic. Between 1960 and 1981, the number of foreign visitors to the U.S. increased from just over 600 thousand to more than 8 million (Stronge 1983). Although Americans traveling overseas still outnumber foreign visitors to this country, the gap has narrowed significantly. International travel is a major export industry and increasingly travel to this country involves visits to our public lands, especially to national parks. The total number of foreign visitors to U.S. sites is known to be substantial, although precise data are unavailable (Manning, 1980). Foreign visitors tend to be older, from professional or technical occupations, and have more

years of education than domestic visitors to U.S. public recreation lands. It was estimated that about one-third of foreign visitors are repeat visitors to a particular recreation area and that scenic beauty is a principal reason for their visit. Generally, foreign visitors participate more as sightseers, walkers, pleasure drivers and developed campers than do domestic visitors (Andereck et al. 1989).

Shorter, closer-to-home recreation trips is a second, clearly emerging trend. For many reasons—such as decreasing leisure and dual-income households—time has become more valuable, leading to the demise of the family vacation. Research by Marriott Corporation indicated that the extended weekend trip has now supplanted the two-to-three-week vacation, necessitating destinations closer to home. This trend has led to a decrease of visits to far removed federal areas, and an increase of visits to near-urban areas.

With changing society, technology and opportunities has come a third trend: changes in the mix of activities that Americans pursue. National polls indicate that some of the changes include relative increases in popularity of downhill skiing, swimming outdoors, canoeing/kayaking, water skiing and cross-country skiing. These polls also indicate relative declines in some forms of boating, driving vehicles off-road, sledding, ice skating, picnicking and pleasure driving. It appears that some of the more

active recreational pursuits have become more popular, and some of the more passive activities have declined in relative popularity. Across the range of activities which Americans pursue, those which are adventurous and somewhat risky, those which offer educational benefits and are not time intensive and those which can be pursued "conveniently" are growth oriented.

Beyond the 1980s

Future Change in Society. The environment surrounding wild-land recreation beyond the 1980s is one of change. Our population will grow even slower than in the past. Over the past five decades, population grew at a rate of about 2 million people per year. Wharton Econometrics Forecasting Associates estimates that additional growth over the next five decades will average only 1.75 million per year. Immigrants will provide a substantial proportion of this expected increase.

Geographic redistribution of population will also be important, with a few rapidly growing non-metropolitan areas and continued extensive population growth in coastal states. In the 1980s, cities and suburbs have been growing rapidly, although a number of non-urban counties continued to grow at a rate more than twice the national average. These fast growing "exurban" counties will increasingly be sought by both retirees and the young because of

quality of life factors, including scenic and recreational amenities and federal wildlands. The estimated 40 percent of the population which lived within 50 miles of the ocean shore in 1984 is projected to double by the early part of the 21st century.

The U.S. population is also becoming more diverse, ethnically and culturally. Immigration and very high birth rates among minority populations are rapidly changing the make-up of American society. The American-Asian population increased 146 percent between 1970 and 1980, while the number of people of Spanish origin rose by 56 percent. During this same period the black population grew by 22 percent, while the white population grew by only 11 percent.

Income distribution projections show polarization toward more high and more low-income families. A decline in the number of middle-income families is expected. Households with incomes over \$50,000 (in 1980 dollars) are projected to triple by the mid-'90s. Older Americans are among those who have become more financially stable. They are increasingly sought as a viable segment of the recreation market in the U.S.

And Further Change in Wildland and Recreation. In the climate created by these and other strongly emerging demographic trends, wildland recreation, too, will be a trend. Through our research, we have developed forecasts of future trends. Based on the best available forecasts of social trends



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and an assumed future that would continue to change the availability of public and private lands for recreation at the positive or negative rates that have occurred since 1970, estimates of future expected consumption of recreational trips away from home were developed. Among land activities, the fastest growing in the future are expected to be: (1) active pursuits—hiking, walking, running, bicycling; (2) educational pursuits—visiting museums, historic sites and pre-historic sites; and (3) social-oriented activities—developed camping and family gatherings. All forms of water and snow activities including canoeing, rafting, swimming and skiing are also projected to grow rapidly.

Comparisons of projections of outdoor recreation supply and

demand for recreation opportunities have revealed some possible short supplies of opportunities for some activities in the future. These shortages reflect a difference between the number of wildland recreational trips Americans would like to take if opportunities were unlimited versus the number of trips Americans could take if scarcities of recreational opportunities which prevailed throughout the 1970s and early 1980s continue. Projected shortages for land-based activities are much larger than projected shortages for water-based or snow and ice-based activities. Among land-based activities, the largest projected shortages are predicted for dispersed recreation such as day hiking, wildlife observation, sightseeing and backpacking. For water-based activities, the largest

projected shortages are likely for activities such as pool swimming and non-motorized lake and river activities including rowing, canoeing and kayaking. Snow and ice-based activities with the largest projected shortages will likely be for dispersed activities such as cross-country skiing.

Future Challenges

This nation's population is still increasing, the demand for outdoor recreation is growing and the public is becoming more diverse, as are their recreational pursuits. There are, however, many who do not participate at all or who do not participate as much as they would like. One of the principal reasons for low participation is the location of opportunities. Many wildland recreation opportunities are located great distances from where the bulk of the population lives. There is growing interest in providing more outdoor recreation opportunities closer to concentrations of population, but urban areas are also where recreation opportunities and open spaces are most threatened by development. In attempting to address this mismatch between where the resources are and where the people are, there is a wide variety of options for change and action.

Expand Opportunities on Public Lands. Most existing public lands can accommodate substantially higher visitation. Actually, many public lands see relatively little use. New or improved access

roads, better and more convenient facilities, trailhead parking and more trails would greatly improve the effectiveness of public lands. Even in areas experiencing relatively high visitation, more intensive management to separate conflicting use, encouragement of use in the off-season and better information on low impact use of backcountry areas could provide new opportunities.

Provide Opportunities Close to Home. Taking a few long vacations to distant places has been largely replaced by more numerous, shorter-duration, close-to-home trips. Thus wildland recreation opportunities close to where large numbers of people live are of growing importance. Such opportunities can be realized through acquisition of land in and near urban areas and through improved planning and economic incentives to encourage recreation and open spaces as communities develop. Some low-use public forest and range lands lie conveniently close to urban areas, particularly in the West.

Improve Quality. A quality environment is central to quality recreational experiences. Through careful management, scenic qualities can be maintained and activities such as timber harvesting made more compatible. Necessary facilities from roads to restrooms can be designed and placed to maintain aesthetic quality, while enhancing enjoyment of the outdoors. Trails can be located to improve the hik-

ing experience.

Because of inadequate funding, there has been a growing backlog of maintenance of public wildland areas. Poorly maintained or unsafe facilities reduce visitors' enjoyment and can actually deter use. Elimination of maintenance backlogs is a badly needed initiative.

Improve Information. To take advantage of opportunities, the public must have information on both public and private opportunities. Often, potential users simply are not aware of close-by opportunities. There is a need for imaginative efforts to provide convenient, one-step information on opportunities offered by local, state and federal agencies. Expanded programs of visitor information, including on-site interpretive and educational services, are needed to help match users with recreational opportunities.

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