

Indicator 37. Number of Visitor Days Attributed to Recreation and Tourism in Relation to Population and Forest Area

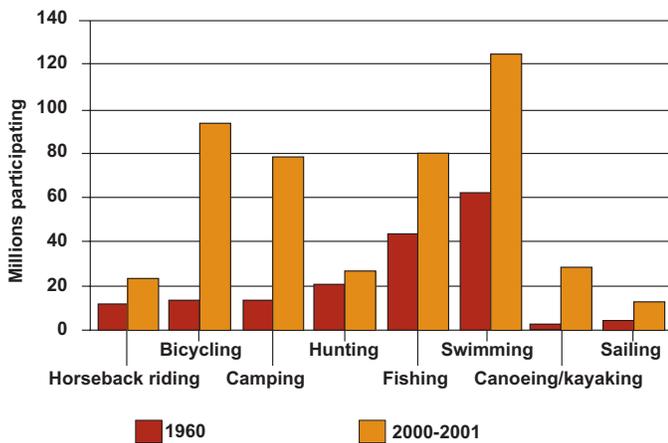


Figure 37-1. Trends in outdoor recreation participation (millions) since 1960.

What Is the Indicator and Why Is It Important?

The indicator shows use of lands and facilities for outdoor recreation as a measure of benefits from forests. The most widely accepted measures of use are a recreation visit (an occasion in which one person enters the land, a site, or a facility for one or more recreational activities of any duration), participation (when a person participates any number of times in an activity during a specified period of time), and activity days (the number of different days on which a person participates in an activity). Increases or decreases in these measures indicate a change in capacity (facilities or access to lands) and/or demand. The measures are important because they indicate the size of the market for activities and demand for the services, facilities, equipment, and land for activities. Societal welfare and the health of the economy are linked to satisfaction of demands for outdoor activities.

What Does the Indicator Show?

Outdoor recreation is a fast-growing use of forests, continuing a steady trend since the 1950s (Figure 37-1). Currently, more than 90 percent of Americans participate in outdoor recreation. Walking has the most participation (84 percent of the population), followed by attending family gatherings (74 percent), visiting nature centers, nature trails, visitor centers, and zoos (57 percent), picnicking (55 percent), and viewing/photographing natural scenery (54 percent). The 10 fastest-growing outdoor activities since the 1980s are bird watching, hiking, backpacking, snowmobiling, walking, off-road vehicle driving, primitive camping, developed camping, downhill skiing, and swimming. Growth of these activities points to the rapid rise in the popularity of trail, motorized, camping, and skiing uses. To measure intensity of use, estimates of recreation days occurring in forest settings show walking for pleasure, viewing natural scenery, viewing birds, viewing flowers, viewing wildlife, day hiking, sightseeing, driving for pleasure, mountain biking, and visiting a wilderness or primitive area as the most actively engaged activities. Estimates of visits to national forests for fiscal year 2001 show that most visits are in general, undeveloped areas (compared with developed site use) and total nearly 137 million visits per year, most of which are in the West. Generally, participation in outdoor activities continues to grow, with greatest growth in nonconsumptive activities that have relatively low impact on forests. Rising demand and declining per capita acres of forest available for recreation will accelerate future conflicts over access by different user interests.

Why Can't the Entire Indicator Be Reported at This Time?

Visitor days as a measure is rarely used any more. Instead, site visits, activity occasions, and participation are the accepted measures. Most sources of use data, however do not distinguish use in forest settings. Additionally, few public and almost no private providers maintain suitable visitation data and none record whether it has occurred in forest settings.