

# Western Forester

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## Outdoor Recreation Connects People and Communities to Public Lands

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Our public and private forestlands in the Pacific Northwest region have long been appreciated and utilized by people for a variety of purposes. In addition to being a source of forest products, grazing, minerals, and other commodities, forestlands are valued as a place for outdoor recreation and tourism. Pacific Northwest forests



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offer world-class scenery that provides favorite places for people to hunt, hike, fish, camp, ski, paddle, and swim, and serves as the backdrop for popular outdoor events like Cycle Oregon (featured on page 17).

Visitation rates to public and private forests in many parts of the Northwest have grown steadily; and, with population growth and diversification, we expect to see visitation continue to climb. In Alaska, nature and scenery is a big part of the draw for cruise ships and some coastal forests are visited by tens of thousands of cruise passengers on guided tours. With advancements in outdoor gear, equipment, and technology, visitors are interacting with Northwest forests in new ways. Forest-based recreation also generates eco-



PHOTO COURTESY OF ALICIA MEIER

**Purchases and rentals of durable goods, such as rafting gear, can generate economic activity locally and regionally.**

nomc activity in adjacent communities. Economic diversification is especially important for community resilience in areas that are in economic transition. Finding ways to encourage sustainable recreation use while also conserving natural resources and promoting a range of economic opportunities is the golden ticket for many land management agencies.

In this article, we provide an overview of current visitation patterns and learn from specific examples where collaborative engagement and creative solutions have been applied. In a companion article, we also turn our heads toward the scientific community to look for innovative approaches that make use of data science, geographic

information systems, digital media, and motion-sensitive cameras to help us plan for, predict, and monitor recreation use. Working together, scientists, partners, and land managers can develop new strategies for protecting environmental and cultural resources, expanding economic opportunities, and sharing the majestic beauty of the Northwest forests.

### Outdoor recreation overview

The Outdoor Industry Association (OIA) estimates that about half of the US population participates in outdoor recreation. That participation rate has remained steady since 2006, when OIA began developing their estimates.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 2)

# Outdoor Recreation Connects People and Communities to Public Lands

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Jogging, fishing, biking, hiking, and camping are the most common activities nationally. Federal lands are one important provider of recreation opportunities and the federal agencies receive about 889 million outdoor recreation visits each year. The National Park Service (331 million visits), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (267 million visits), and the USDA Forest Service (146 million visits) provide for most of those visits.

The outdoor recreation economy relates to the goods and services that people purchase to engage in outdoor recreation. This can include durable goods like backpacks, bikes, and trailers, but it also includes recreation trip spending on lodging, food, gasoline, outfitters, and others. In 2018, the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) estimated the outdoor recreation economy accounted for 2.2% of US GDP, about the size of the US broad-



PHOTO COURTESY OF EMILY JANE DAVIS

**Recreation is the key way most people interact with our natural resources.**

casting and telecommunications industry. For federally-managed lands, the interest is usually on how recreation visitor trip spending (rather than purchase of durable goods) supports economic activity in gateway communities. Each year, visitors to federal lands spend about \$49 billion in communities around federal lands. That spending supports 826,000 jobs across the US.

## Recreation in the Pacific Northwest

In the Pacific Northwest, we love

being outdoors. More than 90 percent of residents in Oregon and Washington participate in some form of outdoor recreation. The most popular activities include hiking/walking, picnicking, camping, sight-seeing, driving for pleasure, and outdoor sports. A variety of different ownerships provide places for us to recreate. In Washington, for instance, hikers are most likely to use state parks and Washington State Department of Natural Resources lands while those going fishing most commonly report using state wildlife areas. Private lands are an important resource for hunters; about half of Washington hunters use private lands.

Forest Service lands in Oregon and Washington receive about 15.6 million visits each year; in Alaska there are more than 3 million visits. Visitation has been stable to slightly increasing over the last 10 years. Hiking/walking (25% of visits), downhill skiing and snowboarding (15% of visits), and viewing natural features (14% of visits) are the most common primary recreation activities in Oregon and Washington. In Alaska, fishing (30%), hiking/walking (18%), and viewing natural features (13%) are the most common primary recreation activities.

Forest Service lands are a key recreation resource for those living nearby. About one quarter of Forest Service recreation visits in Oregon and Washington come from people who live within 35 miles of the forest; half of visits come from those living within 65 miles. In this issue, we learn about how those who live around Oregon



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**Next Issue: Certification—Forest and Forester**

State University's McDonald-Dunn forest are receiving health benefits from recreating on that working forest.

Outdoor recreationists help support the economies of communities around forests when they spend money during their trips. Lodging, food in restaurants and grocery stores, and fuel account for the majority of expenses. In Oregon and Washington, Forest Service recreation visitors spend nearly \$660 million around national forests. That spending supports more than 8,500 jobs in the two states. In Alaska, about 1,300 jobs are supported by the spending of Forest Service visitors. Although the jobs directly supported by visitor spending are focused in the sectors in which visitors spend money, the multiplier effect means that jobs are spread across a wide range of the economy.

Although outdoor recreation can benefit gateway communities, there can also be costs. Nearby communities may suffer from traffic congestion, increased noise and pollution, high housing costs, trespassing, and increased use of emergency services. Municipalities may have to foot the bill to upgrade roads or public facilities to handle the increase in visitor traffic. Transportation planning, signage, and coordination between public land agencies, local officials, tourism associations, and local residents can help to mitigate some of the impacts from these issues.

### Emerging issues and challenges

Managers of public and private forestlands in the Pacific Northwest face a number of challenges in keeping up with demand and providing quality recreation experiences while conserving forest resources. The nature of these challenges varies by geography and season:

(1) Forests near metropolitan areas with steady population growth, like Seattle, Portland, and Anchorage, are expected to experience coinciding visitor growth. Based on trends seen in Forest Service data, much of that increase may occur in popular "front-country" sites accessible to highways. Spillover of visitors into secondary sites means that these areas also face increased use, with implications for facilities, trails, and infrastructure. Moreover, "backcountry" users seeking



PHOTO COURTESY OF ERIC M. WHITE

**Hiking is one of the most popular recreation activities nationally and in the region.**

solitude are at risk of being displaced. Similar trends are observed in cities with an increase in amenity migration—an influx of new residents and industries attracted by natural amenities;

(2) Forest visitation is sometimes fueled by social media, as when images of scenic lakes or waterfalls inspire additional visits from those in the network. For example, Blanca Lake on the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest saw a sharp increase in visitation after it was identified on a social media post as a "most popular" hiking destination;

(3) During peak times, forest managers wrestle with overflowing parking

lots, trash, unmaintained toilets, complaints about congestion, and increased need for emergency response at high-use sites. Recreation managers seek ways to accommodate for growing use of particular sites, while providing opportunities for a variety of experiences;

(4) Because of their natural amenities, topography, trail networks, accessibility or other factors, some areas attract a diverse range of recreation visitors that seek outdoor experiences from a variety of means. When one user group's activities impinge upon another,

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er's enjoyment of the outdoors, recreation managers face complaints; and

(5) Managers also must respond to shifting consumer trends and innovations in recreation gear, equipment, or technology. For example, the recent popularity of electric bikes (e-bikes) has led to user conflicts on trails shared by hikers and other users.

Agencies like the US Forest Service encourage multiple use and aim to provide a wide range of opportunities. It is not uncommon for conflicts to arise among users of the same resources or that use pressures can damage the resource. Recreation man-



PHOTO COURTESY OF ERIC M. WHITE

**Public and private lands combine to provide backdrops for tourists cruising through the Columbia River landscape.**

agers must work with partners to address user conflicts to reach amicable solutions by establishing designated use areas, restricting uses on certain trails, or by controlling use through seasonal restrictions, among others. In this issue, we feature an interesting approach to addressing conflicts associated with target shooting in Oregon's Tillamook State Forest. The emergence of place-based recreation partnerships and collaborative groups demonstrates the complexity of these issues and the need for creative solutions.

In the Northwest, severe storms and

natural events are common, resulting in flooding, landslides, avalanches, and other dramatic landscape changes that can damage or destroy recreation infrastructure and facilities. Wildfire is increasingly a concern. In recent years, increase in fire severity and duration has put homes, property, and recreation visitors at risk and has resulted in damage to trails and facilities.

Smoke from wildfires also appears to be shifting recreation use to other parts of the region. The Eagle Creek Fire in 2017 resulted in long-term recreation closures and has displaced visitors from some of the most popular

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trails in Oregon's Columbia Gorge.

Such recreation closures may have implications for nearby communities dependent on visitor spending. In places where roads, trails, or recreation facilities are damaged in natural events, lack of available recreation maintenance funds may have implications for public safety. Understanding the effects of changes in climate and weather is important to forest managers that seek to manage their lands for sustainable recreation use over the long term.

Recreation managers are often hampered by constrained budgets and personnel, which can impact recreation opportunities.

For example, in FY 2016 approximately one quarter of the 11,300 miles of recreational trails on USFS lands in Oregon met current agency maintenance standards. Maintenance backlogs remain in many publicly managed forests and managers face difficult decisions about whether to repair or remove outdated buildings and facilities with implications for public access. Intrepid travelers navigating damaged roads and trails create safety risks. Fewer agency boots on the ground mean that agency capacity for oversight, enforcement, and active recreation management is constrained. As some units wrestle with both growing recreation demand and diminishing organizational capacity, new solutions and partnerships are needed to leverage resources and meet common goals for resource conservation.

### **Partnerships and shared stewardship**

Public land managers see the benefits of working collaboratively with multiple stakeholders to share in the stewardship of lands for outdoor recreation. Collaborative groups and partnerships can be effective ways of leveraging resources, combining skills and expertise, incorporating local knowledge, and reaching mutually agreeable solutions to complex recreation problems. Collaboration and partnering requires investment on all sides and is not the solution for every problem, but examples from around the Pacific Northwest suggest that working together and co-investing resources can result in better outcomes.

Collaborative groups and partnerships can be focused on specific recreation activities or on larger recreation destinations. Some outdoor recreation activities have strong affinity or advocacy groups that seek to protect and promote that activity. For example, the Mountains-to-Sound Greenway works in concert with the Forest Service to manage recreation on the Middle Fork of the Snoqualmie River. And, as noted in this issue, the Deschutes National Forest works with the Deschutes Trails Coalition to steward and sustain a regional trail system. In southeast Alaska, the Tongass National Forest has partnered with outfitter-guides to provide "leave no trace" curriculum to cruise passengers and to be the "eyes and ears" of the forest in locations that wilderness rangers cannot cover.

Other concerns are more place-based, with a variety of interests that are eager to protect the social or natural conditions of a particular place. An example is the East Cascades Recreation Partnership, consisting of a dozen organizations and public land agencies managing recreation and nature-based tourism across two counties in the Upper Yakima Basin of Washington.

The structure of partnerships and collaborative enterprises established around activity-based or place-based recreation concerns varies widely, but

common elements include a shared purpose toward stewardship, a means of deliberation and decision-making, and an agreement to work together for solutions. Managing recreation and tourism at the regional level, in concert with multiple agencies, industry leaders, and stakeholders can help to protect resources for the long-term and maximize economic opportunity for communities. Recreation managers in the Northwest recognize the value of partnering locally to provide diverse recreation activities and collaborating regionally to protect the integrity of valued spaces and ensure that recreation and tourism are good for the region.

This issue is devoted to understanding current trends and challenges associated with growing use of forestlands for outdoor recreation and tourism. Like the varied recreation interests of residents in the Pacific Northwest, the articles in this issue cover a wide range of recreation issues being addressed by a mix of forest owners. ♦

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