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**OUTDOOR RECREATION ACTIVITY  
TRENDS:  
What's Growing, What's Slowing?**

**A RECREATION Research Report in the IRIS Series<sup>1</sup>**

**September, 2008**

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<sup>1</sup> The Internet Research Information Series (IRIS) is an internet accessible science report series covering outdoor recreation statistics (RECSTATS), wilderness research (WILDERNESS) and other human-dimension and demographics research (DEMOSTATS) related to natural resources. This research is a collaborative effort between the USDA Forest Service's Southern Research Station and its Forestry Sciences Laboratory in Athens, Georgia; the University of Georgia in Athens; and the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Tennessee. <http://warnell.forestry.uga.edu/nrrt/nsre/IrisReports.html>

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## **Introduction**

This report looks at national trends in outdoor recreation activities in the United States. The estimates of numbers of people who participate and total days of activity participation are the same as those partially reported in two recent articles (Cordell, Betz, & Green 2008, & Cordell 2008). The source of data is the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment (NSRE).

## **Methods**

The NSRE is a nationwide survey of outdoor recreation activities conducted by the Forest Service research group in Athens, Georgia. Partners in this survey are the Universities of Georgia and Tennessee. The Athens Forest Service research group has been collecting and reporting data about outdoor recreation activities since the 1980s. The NSRE is a random-digit-dialed household telephone survey of a cross section of non-institutionalized U.S. residents 16 years of age and older. The most recent rounds of NSRE surveying were conducted between the summer of 2005 and spring of 2008 as part of a long-term data collection effort that began in the fall of 1999.

Across all versions of the survey since 1999, more than 100,000 people were asked, “During the past 12 months, did you go [hiking, etc.] outdoors?” If the answer was yes, the person being interviewed on the phone was then asked, “On how many different days did you go [hiking, etc.] in the last 12 months?” Any amount of time spent on an activity was counted, whether or not the activity was the primary reason for being outdoors. The trend in total number of people responding “yes” to any of the activities listed and the total number of days on which they participated between 1999 and 2008 are the two primary statistics reported in this paper.

## **Findings**

From 1999 to 2008, the total number of people who participated in one or more of 60 outdoor activities grew by 4.4 percent, from an estimated 208 million to 217 million (Cordell 2008). At the same time, the number of days of participation across all participants and activities increased from 67 billion to 84 billion, growth of approximately 25 percent (see bottom line in Table 1).

Shown in Table 1 are trends in the number of people participating and total number of activity days for 60 individual activities. For a few of these activities, only the trend in number of people is shown because days of activity participation was not asked in either the earlier survey versions, or in the later ones included in the trend analysis. The trends for some activities show strong growth, for some others there are declines. A major finding from this analysis is that the activities people are choosing as outdoor recreation is changing over time. There is strong evidence from the data in this table that some of the more traditional activities, such as picnicking, visiting historic sites, hunting, downhill skiing (not snowboarding), horseback riding on trails, sailing, snowmobiling,

cross-country skiing, and diving, are becoming less popular than in times past. At the same time, there is strong evidence that walking, family gatherings, viewing/photographing nature, visiting beaches, visiting farms, driving motor vehicles off road, kayaking, and snowboarding are becoming more popular. These trends have very significant implications for both public and private providers of outdoor recreation opportunities. In some ways they may represent an ordering of priorities.

**Table 1.—Trends in number of people participating and number of participation days for 60 outdoor recreation activities in the United States, 1999 – 2008.**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Total U.S. participants (1,000s), 2005-2008</b>	<b>Percent change in participants, 1999-2001 to 2005-2008</b>	<b>Total annual participant days (millions), 2005-2008</b>	<b>Percent change in total days, 1999-2001 to 2005-2008</b>
Visited farm or agric. setting	71,327.7	20.2	3,531.4	100.2
View/photograph flowers, etc.	118,370.7	25.8	10,231.9	77.8
View/photograph natural scenery	145,489.2	14.1	11,482.3	60.5
Drive off-road	44,231.3	18.6	1,349.6	56.1
View/photograph other wildlife	114,792.0	21.3	5,341.6	46.9
View or photograph birds	81,119.9	19.3	8,039.0	37.6
Kayaking	12,480.5	63.1	76.1	29.4
Visit waterside besides beach	55,514.8	1.6	1,077.3	28.1
Backpacking	22,077.0	-0.6	277.7	24.0
Snowboarding	11,273.9	7.3	114.6	23.9
Rock climbing	8,662.0	-5.5	63.0	23.8
Visit nature centers, etc	127,406.5	5.0	1,044.0	23.2
Big game hunting	20,209.8	12.8	320.3	21.2
Mountain climbing	11,811.2	-12.5	104.1	20.5
Visit a beach	95,882.7	10.4	1,424.1	16.3
Sightseeing	113,166.0	4.1	2,352.3	14.0
Walk for pleasure	193,411.7	9.6	20,363.3	13.9
Family gatherings outdoors	164,841.4	4.2	1,330.2	13.7
Visit a wilderness	70,591.9	3.0	1,108.6	12.8
Primitive camping	33,330.2	-2.0	310.4	12.1

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Total U.S. participants (1,000s), 2005-2008</b>	<b>Percent change in participants, 1999-2001 to 2005-2008</b>	<b>Total annual participant days (millions), 2005-2008</b>	<b>Percent change in total days, 1999-2001 to 2005-2008</b>
Developed camping	58,021.3	2.7	532.3	9.3
Anadromous fishing	9,161.8	-0.4	89.1	7.6
Motorboating	54,124.4	3.9	740.6	7.3
Warmwater fishing	51,924.6	7.3	900.1	5.6
Caving	9,871.0	8.9	21.6	3.3
Swimming in lakes, ponds, etc.	92,140.1	4.0	1,333.0	2.2
Gather mushrooms, berries, etc.	71,023.3	16.1	869.3	1.9
Small game hunting	15,006.7	-0.3	236.9	-0.7
Rafting	17,166.3	-16.8	91.6	-1.0
Driving for pleasure	111,069.0	3.1	2,637.3	-1.1
Surfing	4,801.9	29.9	94.9	-1.1
Waterskiing	18,048.9	5.5	150.8	-3.9
Use personal watercraft	19,483.5	-4.1	179.1	-4.3
Rowing	8,517.9	-6.3	60.5	-6.5
Coldwater fishing	28,218.7	-2.1	366.6	-7.0
Visit prehistoric sites	44,938.0	2.4	199.5	-7.3
Cross-country skiing	4,970.7	-39.2	58.8	-7.8
Saltwater fishing	24,543.5	9.9	251.9	-11.0
Snorkeling	15,066.1	5.1	92.1	-12.4
Visit historic sites	92,920.8	-4.5	590.8	-15.2
Downhill skiing	15,615.4	-14.8	126.4	-15.7
Picnicking	115,836.2	-1.4	779.7	-17.2
Canoeing	21,043.8	2.3	117.7	-17.9
Sailing	10,241.9	-6.5	70.6	-18.1
Migratory bird hunting	4,148.9	-16.2	50.6	-18.8
Day hiking	74,032.5	6.8	1,993.4	-20.9

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Total U.S. participants (1,000s), 2005-2008</b>	<b>Percent change in participants, 1999-2001 to 2005-2008</b>	<b>Total annual participant days (millions), 2005-2008</b>	<b>Percent change in total days, 1999-2001 to 2005-2008</b>
Snowmobiling	8,328.2	-29.7	92.7	-27.4
Scuba diving	3,639.8	-9.0	25.4	-31.0
Mountain biking	41,910.1	-8.0	911.7	-32.7
Horseback riding on trails	15,262.6	-8.2	278.3	-35.2
Snowshoeing	3,908.9	-11.8	21.5	-36.6
Windsurfing	1,343.3	-19.1	7.5	-39.5
Bicycling	91,222.5	7.7	.	.
Boat tours or excursions	45,525.7	10.7	.	.
Horseback riding	21,678.5	4.9	.	.
Ice fishing	4,854.0	-14.5	.	.
Ice skating outdoors	11,254.4	-21.3	.	.
Orienteering	5,952.7	58.6	.	.
Sledding	30,197.2	-6.5	.	.
View or photograph fish	61,135.5	16.8	.	.
	<i>217,694.0</i>	<i>4.4</i>	<i>83,914.4</i>	<i>25.1</i>

Source: NSRE 1999-2001 (n=52,607) and 2005-2008 (n=19,186). Note: 1999-2001 participants based on 214.0 million people age 16+ (2000 Census). 2005-2008 participants based on 230.0 million people age 16+ (2006 Census estimate). Missing data indicate that either participation or annual days were not collected during that time period.

## **References**

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