

A National Survey to Determine Public Outdoor Recreation Opportunities on Nonindustrial Private Forest and Range Lands

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Introduction

Demand for outdoor recreational opportunities has continued to grow in the United States despite recessions, wars, and changing lifestyles. Since 1960, the level of spending for recreation by the U.S. population has more than doubled (Cordell and Hendee 1982). By the year 2000, the number of people participating in traditional land- and water-based outdoor recreation is again projected to grow between 22 and 35 percent, respectively (USDA 1980). Both public and private land and water have continued to absorb the rise in recreational demand. But it is not at all clear how long or if either can continue to absorb more demand in the future.

Local, state, and federal budgets for outdoor recreation are shrinking, and the roles and commitments of the involved agencies are being recast. The overall demise of government involvement in outdoor recreation is occurring under the assumption that private lands and capital will fill the voids that government may leave. A critical question facing us as we move toward the 1990s is whether this assumption of private initiative is valid.

The public outdoor recreational potential of nonindustrial private lands is partly determined by the attitudes and values of landowners regarding the use and appearance of their land. As well, this potential is determined by outside governmental and market influences such as government and industry supported incentive programs designed to encourage timber production. In this paper we examine the results of a nationwide survey that focused on the public recreational use policies of private nonindustrial forest and range landowners.

Literature Review

Many previous studies have focused on the timber management aspects of nonindustrial private forestlands. None has focused specifically on public recreational use policies. Among some of the timber oriented studies, however, limited information about public recreational access has been developed.

Kingsley (1976), found that nearly one-third of the private commercial forestland in southern New England is posted to prevent public access. Though only one-third of the landowners posted their lands, many more owners apparently have closed their lands since only 48 percent permitted hiking and only 25 percent permitted hunting. In New Jersey, Kingsley (1975) also found that two-thirds of the privately owned commercial forestland is closed to public use. Hiking was permitted on only 33 percent of the acreage, while hunting was permitted on 35 percent of the land. In Delaware, Kingsley (1975) found a different situation in that hiking was permitted on 65 percent of the forestland and hunting on 55 percent. In West Virginia, 49 percent of private commercial forest landowners permitted some form of public recreation; 24 percent posted their lands (Birch and Kingsley 1978).

Sixty-one percent of Kentucky's owners prohibited public recreational use of their lands in 1975 (Birch and Powell 1978), yet only 14 percent of these Kentucky owners posted their lands. The low percentage posting is largely the result of a law in Kentucky that requires users to obtain written permission from the landowner whether the land is posted or not. In New Hampshire and Vermont, 49 percent of owners prohibited public use and 31 percent posted (Kingsley and Birch 1977). Just under half the private landowners in Pennsylvania prohibited public recreational use in 1981 (Dennis 1982). In Michigan, 27 percent of the owners of nonindustrial private forestlands held land for recreational purposes in 1960 (Quinney 1962).

Whether land is owned for timber or recreational purposes, there seems to be a steady trend toward more closure and posting. For example, posting of New York's rural private lands rose from 26 percent in 1963, to 42 percent in 1972, and to 48 percent in 1980 (Decker et al. 1982). Greater posting, more club leasing, greater subdivision, more timber growing and harvesting incentive programs (USDA 1973), and persistent long-term rises in timber prices (O'Laughlin 1982) all point toward increasing pressures to close more private forestland to public use. The literature reports almost no evidence that private lands will become more available for public recreational use in the future. In the text that follows, we examine some of the reasons that private lands have been closed and explore landowner attitudes toward incentives to reverse the apparent closure trend.

Objectives and Method

The national survey was conducted in 1977 of a sample of nonindustrial private forest and range landowners across 500 counties representing all 50 states. The basic objectives of the national survey were to: describe the general characteristics of the sampled owners and ownerships; describe the public recreational use and development policies of the landowners; and to assess the potential for increasing public outdoor recreation opportunities on nonindustrial private lands currently closed to the public.

Nonindustrial private, rural forest and range landowners in the United States owning 40 acres or more were defined as the population of interest. A population estimate of 2.5 million landowners was defined from several sources (U.S. Department of Commerce 1969, USDA Forest Service 1972, and USDA Forest Service 1973). To obtain estimates of frequencies of landowner policies and characteristics with 98 percent confidence, a national sample of 2,502 was required.

A list of potential respondents was generated by a random sample of 10 counties per state. The Soil Conservation Service District Conservationist in each selected county cooperated in the study by submitting names and addresses of 10 landowners using a systematic draw-with-a-random-start sample procedure. The landowners chosen to receive a questionnaire had to own 40 or more acres of rural land and the land had to be at least partially covered by woodlands or natural range; that is, not totally devoted to crop production or other intensive uses.

Questionnaires were mailed directly to the landowners during January 1977. Follow-up postcards were mailed seven days after the initial mailings urging the landowners to respond if they had not already done so. During the sixth week after the initial mailing, the SCS District Conservationists were notified of the nonrespondents in their respective districts and were sent new question-

naires and cover letters to be delivered personally or mailed with a follow-up phone call to urge response. Usable responses totaled 2020 (41 percent).

Results

Owner Characteristics

Respondents to the survey were similar to other samples of NIPF owners. For instance, our sample of owners indicated that farming and primary residence were the major reasons for owning land (65 percent). Nearly 60 percent had owned their land for less than 20 years, and most owners were middle-aged or older. Only 18 percent were less than 40 years of age.

For the most part responding landowners were moderately to well-educated with 53 percent indicating they had attended college. Thirty-three percent indicated an annual family income of \$25,000 or more. In addition, many of the responding owners held relatively large tracts. Forty-three percent owned more than 250 acres; only 22 percent owned less than 100 acres.

These characteristics are very similar to other national samples, suggesting that the respondents to this survey represent the national population of nonindustrial private owners.

Recreational Availability Status

A principal finding of this survey was that less than one-third (31 percent) of the nonindustrial private acreage in the United States was designated by its owners as open for public recreational use. These lands (about 208 million acres) are open under two categories of owner policy, (1) open without any requirement or permission and (2) open only if a fee is paid and/or if permission is obtained.

Fifty-one percent of the responding nonindustrial owners reported all of their lands closed. Twenty-nine percent indicated that portions of their land were closed. In total, the land reported as closed represents 42 percent of the acreage reported by landowners. Another 27 percent of the acreage was neither designated as open nor closed. We assumed, however, that this 27 percent was either closed to recreational use by the general public, or that if available, it was available only under very restrictive conditions. Thus, an estimated 69 percent (about 464 million acres) of private nonindustrial forest and range lands in the United States by intention of the landowners is apparently unavailable to the public for their recreational pursuits. This represents closure of just over 20 percent of the total U.S. land area.

Open lands. Owners who permit public recreational use reported several reasons for doing so. Improved public relations was the primary motivation of 33 percent of the responding owners. Twenty-one percent indicated an open policy because it would be too difficult or costly to post and enforce the postings. Smaller percentages indicated that their land was open because of its income earning potential or because of fear of vandalism.

The principal recreational activities permitted by owners with open land policies included hunting (63 percent), fishing and hiking (37 percent each), picnicking (27 percent), camping (21 percent), and off-road vehicle driving (16 percent). Except for camping, these activities are dispersed and do not require facility development. In general, less than 10 percent of the NIPF owners provided recreational facilities or development for public use, depending on the activity considered.

Most landowners with land available for public recreational use reported that recreation visitors create some problems. The owners cited littering (23

percent), illegal hunting or fishing (14 percent), vandalism (13 percent), crop damage (12 percent), and privacy disturbance (8 percent) as major problems associated with public recreational use of their lands. In all these situations, the landowners are protected by laws which prohibit such acts as firesetting and vandalism, but they apparently felt that existing levels of enforcement were not adequate to fully protect their rights and property.

Closed Lands. Even though approximately 69 percent of private nonindustrial lands are not available for public recreational use, it is important to point out that some recreational activities do occur on these lands. About 202 million acres (30 percent of the national total) are available for recreational use only by employees, friends, family, or a leasee group. Though use by these groups probably represents a large number of people, these "restricted use" lands are closed to the vast majority of the public and thus represent a limited supply potential. The growing trend toward leasing private lands by organized clubs for their exclusive use will very likely further limit the public recreation potential of nonindustrial private lands in the future.

Nonindustrial private landowners have closed parts or all of their land to public recreational use for a number of stated reasons. The principal reasons for closure included fear of property damage or vandalism (16 percent), to preserve personal privacy (15 percent), to prevent interference with current land uses (14 percent), and to protect wildlife (12 percent). These widely held beliefs among landowners regarding possible problems resulting from public use are likely to act more as deterrents to opening land in the future as population growth puts more pressure on landowners. The methods employed most often by landowners to enforce closure to public use were posting and fencing.

Ninety-two percent of the landowners with closed lands indicated that they had no plans to allow public use or development of their properties between the time of the survey and 1985. Only 5 percent indicated they would consider opening their lands if they could reasonably require user fees or permits. Only 1 percent of the owners said they had intentions to open their land without requiring user fees or permits.

Most owners of closed lands (90 percent or more) indicated they have no plans to implement recreation management practices. Only 9 percent indicated the possibility of a lease to other persons for recreation and some of these (8 percent) indicated that they may also enter into a cooperative agreement with a government agency to cooperate in providing recreation on their property.

Most owners seemed reluctant to make positive statements concerning possible conditions that might encourage opening or reopening some of their closed lands. Thirty-eight percent of the owners who now have all of their lands closed apparently would not reopen these lands under any conditions. With financial incentives and/or protection from lawsuit or property loss, 51 percent would be encouraged to open their closed lands. This indicates that opportunities may exist for designing programs to stimulate public recreational access.

In questions exploring the preferred respective roles of private landowners and government, the strongest preference cited was for separate supply roles. Seventy percent of landowners felt that some opportunities should be provided both by government and by private landowners. Only 30 percent felt that supply responsibility should rest solely with government agencies. Of interest, though, is the attitude held by 55 percent of the landowners that government should provide direct assistance to landowners to provide public

recreation opportunities and that government should share the costs of developing and managing recreation sites on private lands. Also of interest is the opinion of 16 percent of these landowners that government should be responsible for facility development on private lands. Overall, landowners seem to be interested in cooperative arrangements with government. Incentives, cost-sharing, and public development on private lands may represent means for enhancing future supplies of recreation opportunities on private lands.

Discussion

Our future will be driven by many different factors and forces. Among these, a dominating one is a growing human population with ever rising demands for land, labor, and capital to produce goods and services. Recreation is one of the services that has risen in stature through our history from a frivolity for the rich to a generally accepted and needed lifestyle shared by most segments of contemporary society.

Pressures to use forests and other lands for outdoor recreation is large and getting larger. Yet our land base is finite. There are no new lands that government can purchase to meet the growing recreation demand pressure. At least some of the expansion of recreation opportunities for this country must occur on private lands.

What about the potential of these private lands? History has demonstrated a trend toward greater closure of public access to private lands. Beyond this, we seem to know very little about the policies, practices, and belief of the owners that will determine the public recreational use potentials of private lands. This lack of knowledge prompted a nationwide survey conducted jointly by the Forest Service, the Soil Conservation Service, and several universities. The survey explored land and landowner characteristics, public use policies, and perceived problems.

The nationwide survey revealed many important characteristics of nonindustrial private forest and range lands, including an estimate that less than one-third of the total 672 million nonindustrial acres are open for public recreational use. Among the owners of the 464 million acres of closed lands, there is an attitude that recreational use interferes with other land uses, particularly income producing uses.

Owners who have closed their lands generally have no intentions of reopening them unless economic incentives and protection from lawsuits and property damages were provided. One way of providing incentives that many of the surveyed landowners found desirable is cooperation with government entities in providing public access and facilities. Cost-sharing facility development or direct government development of sites on private lands were favored by significant percentages of landowners as effective ways to cooperate.

In a time when there is much concern about the status of nonindustrial private forest and range lands we need to account for the landowners' opinions. Regarding public recreational access, landowners generally are not very willing to permit the public past their gates, fences, and postings without some compensation or protection. If left to their own devices, landowners are most likely to choose closure or perhaps lease to a club or group. In either case, the non-member recreation seeker will be excluded. Unless we take strong collective action, we will continue on a sure course toward closure of more private lands.

Complicating the supply situation, our governments are increasingly faced with smaller budgets yet more demands for services. On a broad front this has meant retreat from the liberal recreation service and development growth policies of the 1960s and 1970s. The expectation on the part of government is that the private sector, including nonindustrial forest and range owners, will seize the resulting market opportunities and fill the voids left by government retreat. Our national survey provides little support for this assumption of privatization of the recreation market.

As a society we are faced with two choices. The first of these is whether or not we wish to continue to provide and expand opportunities for outdoor recreation to meet growing demand, as we have in the past. We may not be able to afford such growth in the future. Should we decide that outdoor recreational opportunity in natural settings is a national priority, the next step would be to determine how to accomplish supply expansion.

Expanding the supply of outdoor recreation opportunities in this country will require affirmative and substantial program commitment. Government may have to bear some of the financial burden that such a commitment would bring. With this commitment also comes the decision whether to expand supply on public or on private lands. In the past, expansion has occurred on public lands. If it is now to occur on private lands, a carefully designed and managed, but well funded program seemingly will be needed. If it is not well funded, then it probably should not be undertaken. The public interest will not be well served unless there are substantial and continued flows of information and incentives. This may even be necessary just to retain access to the less than one-third of nonindustrial private lands that remain open to the public.

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