

Public Recreational Access to Private Lands: An Update on Trends and the Foreseeable Future

by H. Kenneth Cordell, Ph.D., and Brett Wright, Ph.D.

Projections indicate that demand for outdoor recreation continues to increase even though the amount of opportunity (space, facilities, settings) which is effectively available near populated places is often growing quite scarce (Cordell, et al.). There are a finite number of public areas and acres available to meet this growing demand and substantial growth of public lands in the future is very unlikely. If projected outdoor recreation demand growth becomes a reality on those recreational opportunities, public lands which are effectively located will not, it seems, be sufficient. Vast acreage of private rural lands are suitably located near populations in most parts of the country, but their true effectiveness depends upon their availability, primarily accessibility, for various recreational pursuits. There are approximately 1.2 billion private, non-industrially owned acres in the 48 contiguous states. Of these properties, an estimated 357 million acres were considered by their owners to be open to the public for recreational uses in 1977.

This article examines the trend in public access to non-industrial private lands since 1977 and provides a look at the likely future of private land recreational access as we approach the 21st century. The source of data was national studies conducted by the senior author—the 1976–77 and the 1986–87 National Private Land Ownership Studies, NPLOS.

The Contemporary Context of Private Lands

Much of the private land base is in agricultural uses. During most of our history, agriculture was usually considered the “highest and best” use of the lands, and it was often highly profitable. In recent times, however, commodity surpluses, depressed farm prices and subsequent reduced farm incomes have changed the picture for agriculture and typically only the largest and most lucratively financed corporate farms seem able to survive. Partly due to the decline of agriculture, about 1 million rural acres annually are converted to urban and “built-up” uses, sometimes consuming prime farm lands (USDA 1987).

Private forest and range lands face a similar contemporary context. Ironically, range is being converted to cropland in disproportionately high amounts in Montana, South Dakota and Colorado. Nationally, “losses” are projected at almost 25 million acres by 2040. Much of the existing range is in need of “restoration.” Forests face similar pressures—conversions to croplands in some areas, subdivision for personal residential uses in most areas, and projected “losses” of about 19 million acres by the year 2040.

Overall, the status of private lands is rapidly changing. The pressure is to convert intensively cultivated uses or farm crop production conditions to single ownership for exclusive

residential or recreational purposes.

Non-industrial Private Land and Recreational Access

Almost two-thirds of the non-industrial land, 27 and 35 percent, respectively, is situated in the Northeast and Southeast. Almost another one-third of private, non-industrial land is in the Rocky Mountain Region (including the Great Plains); seven percent is along the Pacific Coast. As of 1987, 81 percent of this non-industrial land was in ownerships (tracts) of size less than 100 acres each.

<100 (acres)	81%
100-499	16%
500-2,499	<3%
>2,500	<1%

The lands with which this article is most concerned are those available for public recreation. Past research has shown that recreational availability is in part dependent on tract size, with smaller tracts generally being less available. As our future unfolds, more tracts are being subdivided into the small-size categories, often under 20 acres in size. These small tracts are not well suited for recreational uses, particularly hunting, and especially when the owners reside on the property.

No single factor seems to have had a more direct bearing on public recreational access than subdivision caused by land

acquisition for residential and personal recreational purposes. In 1987, 64 percent of owners of 20 or more acres reported personal recreation as an important or very important reason for owning. Fifty-nine percent owned for the rural lifestyle or living environment afforded by owning and living on rural land.

In 1977, 42 percent of non-industrial tracts and 29 percent of the acreage were reported by owners as open for public recreation (Cordell, et al., 1977). In 1987, the total percentage of non-industrial acreage open for public use was down to 23 percent; percentage of ownerships was down to almost 29 percent (Figure 1). Of the open acreage, about 20 percent was under a recreational lease and 80 percent was open for free or for a daily fee. In total, 283 million private non-industrial acres were open for public or lease recreation in 1987 (Cordell et al., 1988).

Open Recreation Land, Not Under Lease

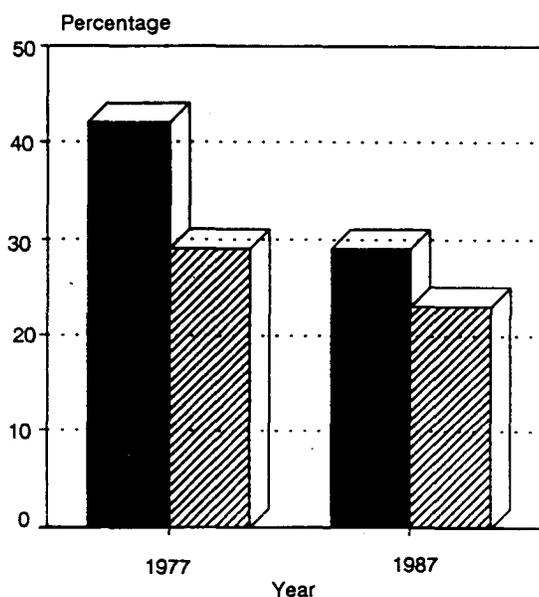
In 1986-87, 29 percent of private, non-industrial landowners in the contiguous 48 states had 283 million acres open for public recreational use. Of this 283 million acres, about 80 percent was open under various conditions other than a formal lease. These conditions and percentages of owners who have land open to the public under each condition is summarized below:

Written permission and a fee	1 percent
Written permission only	7 percent
Fee only	<1 percent
Ask and pay fee	1 percent
Ask only	61 percent
No requirement, just walk on	24 percent
Other	5 percent

Most landowners have relatively small acreage open for

public use; 76 percent have less than 100 acres open. Among recreational activities permitted on these open lands, hunting is by far the most frequent (58 percent of ownerships). Other frequently permitted activities include photography (49 percent), nature study (44 percent), bird watching (44 percent), hiking (43 percent), picnicking (37 percent) and horseback riding (35

Figure 1. Ownerships and Acreage of Private Non-industrial Land Open to Public Recreation, 1977 and 1987.



Source: 1976-77 and 1986-87 National Private Landownership Study, Outdoor Recreation and Wilderness Assessment Group, Forest Service, Athens, Georgia.

percent). In general, non-consumptive, low-impact activities are more often permitted; off-road vehicle riding was permitted by only 18 percent.

Leased Recreation Land

Leasing as a means for obtaining access to private lands has been increasing in recent years. In 1977, 2.4 percent of landowners reported having a recreational lease on their land. In 1982, the percentage was 4.7 percent, in 1987 the percentage was 6.6 percent. These percentages reflect the proportions of the sample, i.e., respondents, and are shown above in their unweighted form so that the 1986-87 study could be compared to the unweighted 1976-77 study.

When weighted to reflect the true percentage of the population of owners, just under 4 percent of owners lease 4.4 percent of the non-industrial land base in the 48 contiguous states. This is 53 million acres, just under 20 percent of recreationally accessible private acres nationwide. The percentages reported below represent proportions of the total of private, non-industrial acreage in each region that is recreationally leased:

North	1.8 percent
South	8.1 percent
Rocky Mt./Great Plains	0.9 percent
Pacific Coast	
(ex. HI and AK)	11.6 percent

The majority of reasons given for leasing included income to help pay taxes, other supplemental income, helping to protect the land and goodwill toward others. Owners of larger tracts (more than 500 acres) more frequently have income for paying taxes or other uses as a reason for leasing than do smaller ownerships.

On average across the country, a lease costs about \$750 per year, about \$3 per acre, \$90 per person in the leasing party. Most leases on large tracts (over 500 acres) are with clubs or other groups of recreationists (71 percent). Most leases on smaller tracts are with individuals or other arrangements other than clubs or organized groups (62 percent). Estimated total revenue to private owners from leases in 1986/87 was about \$160 million. Importantly, owners who lease for recreation are much more involved in and spend substantially greater amounts of money to improve and manage their land for conservation, wildlife habitat or fisheries.

Observations About the Future

This brief overview of public recreational use of non-industrial lands in the United States points to both concerns and opportunities. Recent past trends and the data reported here indicate that private land is becoming less available for public recreation. If such trends continue, this historically vital recreational op-

portunity may practically disappear for all except those able to purchase a lease. This will put more recreational use pressure on public lands and will likely further curtail outdoor recreation involvement by many Americans.

In 1986 the President's Commission on Americans Outdoors noted access to private lands, and to open spaces in general, as a current and growing "problem." The Commission's recommendations reflected a concern that means must be found to maintain the availability of currently open land and to increase the amount of open acreage.

Because recreation seems to be a desirable public objective, and because the public sector will not likely be able to afford further substantial land purchases, an obvious solution is to work more with private owners to provide access for public recreation. Avenues include financial assistance, encouragement of fee recreational access, tying public access to farm assistance programs, in-kind management or enforcement assistance and preferential tax treatment.

These are not new ideas, but they are now more feasible possibilities in the new contemporary context of the 1980s. That context is one of a hard "squeeze" on private lands caused by drastic changes in land ownership circumstances, e.g., subdivision and decline of agriculture.

If ever there has been a ready-

made opportunity to exercise the highly touted concept of private/public partnerships, it seems that addressing the need to provide the public with access to private lands for recreation is just such an opportunity. Mechanisms in the public sector and, from research results, a willingness on the part of the private sector exist. The missing ingredients seem to be a consciousness of the importance of the situation and a commitment to take action.

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