

National forests see fewer visitors

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Stephanie Yao/The Oregonian

A lone biker pedals along the Sisters Loop Trail in the Deschutes National Forest south of Sisters. About 4 percent of national forest users went bicycling, according to new Forest Service figures on visitor use, which is declining across the nation.

National forests have long been prime recreation spots in the Pacific Northwest and around the nation, but new federal figures show far fewer people are visiting them since 2004 -- especially in this region.

Now researchers are trying to determine why people are staying away from the prized public playgrounds, including the nearby Mount Hood, Gifford Pinchot and Deschutes national forests.

Their ideas include high gas prices, rising visitor fees, youths glued to television and video games and a busy, urban society with little time for outdoor pursuits.

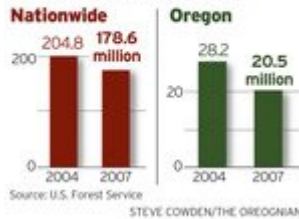
They say the decline is troubling for rural economies that increasingly look to tourism and recreation to replace revenue lost when logging dried up. It also may leave fewer people who champion the value of public lands.

"I think that there is cause for concern," said Thomas More, a researcher at the U.S. Forest Service's Northern Research Station in Vermont. "There's some important consequences for rural communities and for people's chance to get out and enjoy being in the outdoors."

The visitor decline turned up last month when the Forest Service released new figures from visitor monitoring in 2007. The numbers provided the first comparison against figures from 2004.

Wilderness use drops

Visits to national forests have fallen off nationwide and sharply in Oregon.



The figures are estimates based on surveys and counts around each national forest. Total forest visits dropped from 204.8 million in 2004 to 178.6 million in 2007, a 13 percent decline. Visits to Oregon and Washington national forests fell from 28.2 million in 2004 to 20.5 million in 2007, a 27 percent drop.

That's the sharpest percentage drop of any Forest Service region in the country. The next largest drop was 24.3 percent decline in the Forest Service's Eastern Region, which encompasses several Midwest and northeastern states.

National forests began using the new counting system in the past several years, so some of the decline may result from errors as forest staff learned to use the new system, said Don English, the Forest Service's visitor use monitoring program manager. But he acknowledged there is some real decline, probably driven primarily by higher gas prices and a worsening economy.

He said he doesn't know how much of the decline to blame on each factor.

"There's probably a decline on the ground, but there's no way I can tease that out exactly," he said.

The Forest Service developed the new counting system to replace an earlier method that wildly overestimated numbers of recreational visitors. Recreation has become an increasingly prominent use of national forests -- and an important economic driver -- as logging declined.

While some of the estimated decline may result from counting errors, a substantial amount may be driven by changes in society, said Thomas Stevens, a professor of resource economics at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst who studies public land recreation. With more single-parent families and families where both parents work full-time, there may be less time to take leisurely family trips to the national forests, he said.

"There are some accuracy issues, but there's also clearly a decline," he said. He, More and other researchers are trying to examine the specific causes behind the drop-off through surveys and other data.

Visitors to national forests do not seem unhappy: More than 80 percent said they were satisfied with facilities and services at developed sites. The most common activity for forest visitors was viewing natural features, with 51 percent saying that was one of their pursuits.

Only 12 percent said they engaged in more traditional pursuits, such as fishing, and 9 percent hunted.

Stevens said some of the visitation decline may be driven by user fees national forests charge to bring in revenue that pays for recreational facilities. Fee systems in the Pacific Northwest include the \$30 annual Northwest Forest Pass, required for parking at certain trailheads, picnic areas and other forest sites.

"Whatever's going on, it's probably not one simple thing," Stevens said.

He said a drawback of the fees is that forests have become increasingly dependent on them for revenue, even as the revenue is vulnerable to declines in visitation. Without the revenue, forests may be unable to maintain facilities such as restrooms and picnic areas. "If participation drops, some of these areas could deteriorate significantly," he said. "I'm concerned that this could lead to some fairly major changes if it continues."

Visits to undeveloped national forest wilderness areas also dropped, from 8.8 million in 2004 to 6.3 million in 2007. Wilderness visits typically involve longer hikes or backpacking. About two-thirds of wilderness visitors were men.

Scott Silver of the Bend-based group Wild Wilderness, which fights commercialization of public lands, said it should be no surprise that visitation has declined over the years when public land fees have become more widespread.

"As the prices rise, the demand decreases," he said. "Why should anyone have not expected that?"

But he said that if some people are turning away from public lands by choice -- because they no longer have time or no longer find outdoor recreation appealing -- that is disconcerting.

"If people are really moving away from public lands, who is going to protect them?" he asked.

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