The State of the Great Outdoors: Charting Recent Trends, Assessing Funding Needs, and Understanding Americans’ Connection to Nature

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In 2008 and 2009, the Outdoor Resources Review Group (ORRG), a private bipartisan panel of recreation professionals, public officials, and conservation advocates, assessed priorities, challenges, and opportunities in managing the nation’s land and water resources. The 17-member panel, with U.S. Senators Lamar Alexander (R-TN) and Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) as honorary co-chairs, held a series of public meetings and focused workshops that culminated in a report presented to the Secretary of the Interior. In support of the ORRG effort, my colleagues and I at Resources for the Future conducted an independent assessment of trends in demand and supply of open space, parks, and public lands—as well as funding and financing of these resources—during the past quarter-century.

Our research revealed 2 especially important findings. First, there has been a marked shift from public funding of national parks and other publicly owned lands to private sector funding, largely through conservation land trusts, and to public funding of conservation easements on private land. In addition, the focus 25 years ago was on parks and recreation lands, but emphasis has shifted toward wildlife habitat, farmland, wetlands, and other kinds of open space. Second, the picture revealed through data on Americans’ time spent outdoors, park visits, participation in recreation activities, and other information is a puzzling one that suggests a need for more research. Voters routinely support conservation financing referenda at very high rates and polls often show high support for parks and open space, yet the average American spends fewer than 2 hours per week in outdoor pursuits.

Changes in the Funding Landscape

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), the primary source of funding for federal land acquisition and state grants since 1965, has declined significantly. In its first 15 years, annual appropriations averaged $1.23 billion (in inflation-adjusted 2008 dollars); 54 percent was allocated to states. Since then, annual appropriations have averaged $789 million (in 2008 dollars) and the state grants portion has fallen sharply. In 2008, a total of $255 million was appropriated and less than 10 percent went to states. The loss of state grants has a ripple effect because, by law, those grants must also flow to local communities for parkland and park development projects.

As the LWCF diminished, an array of new federal programs emerged, focusing on habitat conservation and restoration, trail development, wetlands recovery, farmland protection, and other activities. More than 30 such federal programs now exist and, in FY2008, spending totaled more than $6 billion. Those supported in the Farm Bill account for the bulk of the money—63 percent in FY2008. The largest single program is the Conservation Reserve Program, which pays farmers to take land out of farming for 15-year periods in order to protect habitats, control erosion, and buffer streams; in FY2008, it had a nearly $2 billion budget.

Private conservation has also increased considerably. The number of conservation land trusts has nearly doubled in the past 10 years and the land area protected by these organizations has skyrocketed. Between 2000 and 2005, acreage protected by land trusts increased 96 percent.

A Nature Deficit?

Our research showed a mixed—and at times missing—picture of Americans’ connection to the outdoors. Visits to state parks, national parks, and other federal recreation sites have stayed roughly constant since the late 1970s but have fallen on a per capita basis; in other words, the average American makes fewer visits per year than in the past. Unfortunately, data on urban park use are spotty and time trends unavailable. With 80 percent of Americans living in urban areas, this is a critical data deficiency.

A useful and underutilized source of information on outdoor recreation is the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics’ American Time Use Survey and its predecessors, which date to 1965. Our analysis of those data shows that time spent in outdoor recreation and recreation participation rates in the late 2000s are both significantly higher than in 1965 but fall below levels in the 1980s. Statistical analysis...
suggests several demographic factors can help explain the patterns and that availability of leisure time is particularly important.\textsuperscript{11} Other researchers have argued that the decline in leisure, particularly leisure that comes in large blocks of time, is an important factor in the decline in outdoor pursuits and visits to parks, particularly national parks located far from population centers.\textsuperscript{1}

The obesity crisis in the U.S. and the well-established importance of outdoor recreation and physical activity for both physical and mental health make these findings a matter of concern. In addition, the fact that Americans show support for environmental issues and approve conservation spending measures at the polls, yet spend a very limited amount of time outdoors in their daily lives, presents a bit of a conundrum. There is need for more research on how people value and use nature.

**A New Federal Initiative**

In April 2010, President Obama signed a formal memorandum launching the America’s Great Outdoors initiative.\textsuperscript{2} Its main goal is to “reconnect Americans, especially children, to America’s rivers and waterways, landscapes of national significance, ranches, farms and forests, great parks, and coasts and beaches.”\textsuperscript{3} The initiative also proposes to establish conservation priorities and find ways for the federal government to advance those priorities, especially through leveraging of private partnerships and local efforts.

A first step in fulfilling this mission is to gather better national data, especially on urban recreation, and improve understanding of how Americans value the outdoors and the factors that explain participation in outdoor activities in our modern world. Current needs must be identified to help the federal government better establish its funding priorities. In today’s budgetary climate, large increases in federal funding are unlikely, making the establishment of priorities all the more important. Does the current focus on wildlife habitat, wetlands, farmland, and the like over parks and recreation areas help meet the goals of the America’s Great Outdoors initiative, or is a realignment of federal resources in order? If the president is serious in his efforts to “reconnect Americans, especially children,” to the outdoors, it may be time to take a serious look at how federal dollars are spent.

**Notes**

I. Both the ORRG report and the accompanying RFF research report are available to download at www.rff.org/orr. See Outdoor Resources Review Group\textsuperscript{3} and Walls et al.\textsuperscript{4} A list of the ORRG members is also on this website.

II. See Siikamäki\textsuperscript{5} for more detail on this analysis.

III. The President’s memorandum\textsuperscript{2} is available at www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/presidential-memorandum-americas-great-outdoors.

**References**


