

TRENDS IN HIKING AND BACKCOUNTRY USE¹

Edward L. Spencer
Herbert E. Echelberger
Raymond E. Leonard²
Craig Evans²

Pedestrian movement in backcountry settings has increased dramatically in the past 20 years. But the rate of increase seems to be levelling. Some indicators of this trend include the publishing business, the number of equipment manufacturers and outlets, the number of backcountry outfitters, and consultation with entrepreneurs.

For more than a decade there has been an increase in the number of people hiking and camping in backcountry areas. Are there really more people hiking and backpacking or do the same number of people hike and camp more often? Is the trend continuing upward or is it changing? Each year backcountry managers record the use that these areas receive. This data is useful as a guideline for the next year's operational procedures, budgetary concerns and staff assignments. Rarely, however, does the opportunity arise for managers to compare data and establish long-term trends for the use of a large regional area. Such a comparison could provide valuable information for backcountry managers in anticipating their future needs. This paper addresses the issue of trends in backcountry use in the northeast, identifies some indicators of national hiking and backpacking trends, and speculates on possible future pedestrian activities. As was the case with most of the other papers, it was very difficult to assemble comparable and meaningful data on hiking and backpacking trends.

A public survey conducted in 1965 by the U.S. Bureau of Census for the BOR showed that

¹Paper presented at the National Outdoor Recreation Trends Symposium, Durham NH, April 20-23, 1980.

²Edward L. Spencer, Chief, Park Planning, Adirondack Park Agency, Box 99, Ray Brook NY
Herbert E. Echelberger, NEFES, U.S. For. Serv., Durham NH
Raymond E. Leonard, NEFES, U.S. For. Serv., Durham NH
Craig Evans, American Hiking Society, Washington, D.C.

9.9 million Americans hiked or backpacked. A similar survey, done in 1977 by Opinion Research Corp. under contract to the HCRS (BOR's successor) revealed that 28.1 million Americans backpacked or hiked--nearly a threefold increase.

Similar increases are reflected in actual visitor-use statistics. For example, in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, records of visitors to backcountry facilities are maintained by the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC). In the 19-year period from 1960 to 1978, AMC hut use quadrupled, increasing from approximately 7,000 visitor nights to approximately 28,000 visitor nights per year (Table 1). In that period, average hut use increased by over 1,000 people per year. Part of this increase is due to an extended hut season and AMC officials feel that the general increase in hut use may have begun to plateau. Comparing use increases for the past ten years with use increases for the past four years shows that use has increased at a much slower rate in the past four than the past ten years.

Records of shelter and tentsite use for the months of July and August in the White Mountains go back only to 1974. Shelter use has remained relatively stable and it is difficult to establish any trends. In 1974, shelter use ran unusually high and was then followed by lower use. Now use is fluctuating around an average of 7,500 visitors. Most of the drop in the 1979 shelter use occurred during the month of July. It is speculated that gasoline uncertainties accounted for most of this decrease.

The Allagash Wilderness Waterway in Maine has records dating back to 1966. Visitor use

of this area increased rapidly compared to other northeastern areas such as Baxter State Park, White Mountains, and Green Mountains. However, there was a drop in use in 1974. The rapid increase in use during the early seventies may have been due to the state acquisition of the Waterway in 1966 resulting in greater publicity. Starting in 1973, however, the Allagash Advisory Committee suggested that publicity agents not publicize the Allagash, that a fee system be established in 1974 to discourage large group use, and that restrictions be imposed to limit party size to twelve persons or fewer. This led to the leveling and decline in use during 1973 and 1974. However, in the next four years, an upward trend was again established. Despite this recent increase measures taken by the Allagash Advisory Committee appear not only to have initially decreased visitor days, but also to have decreased the rate of the following increase.

icials feel that this trend may be the result of new camping facilities that were added to the Club's total shelter system. They do not notice a drop in day use, but agree that the rate of increased hiker and backpacker traffic has leveled considerably. They observed a distinct extension of the hiking season into the foliage season.

At the national level, the U.S. Forest Service has kept records of national forest recreation use by types of activities. This data is summarized in Table 2. As an activity, hiking and mountain climbing has increased steadily from 4 to 11 million visitor-days between 1966 and 1979. As a portion of total recreation use on all national forests, it seems to be increasing in popularity. In 1966, hiking and mountain climbing was 2.8 percent of the total use; by 1970, it had gone up to 3.2 percent; in 1975, it was 4.5 percent; and by 1979, it was 5.1 percent of total forest recreation use.

Table 1.--Visitor use of backcountry areas.

Year	White Mountains New Hampshire		Allagash Waterway Maine	Baxter State Park Maine	Green Mountains Vermont
	AMC Huts	AMC Shelters (JUL & AUG)			
1960	6,927				
1965	13,176				
1966	14,722		4,141		
1967	12,861		4,539		
1968	13,501		3,786		
1969	14,411		4,820		
1970	17,299		5,460		
1971	18,856		6,345		
1972	21,693		8,260		
1973	23,587		8,337		4,726
1974	24,471	8,187	7,477	11,684	5,053
1975	25,719	7,196	9,477	10,811	5,765
1976	28,426	6,983	8,619	9,683	6,391
1977	26,915	7,705	9,278	8,983	5,138
1978	28,032	7,435	9,734	7,988	5,067
1979		6,250	8,932	10,221	4,816
				10,082	4,449

At Baxter State Park in Maine, use decreased dramatically between 1973 and 1977. This also was the result of management restrictions. Seasonal use decreased at a rate of approximately 900 people per year. However, in 1978 the trend changed and instead of the expected decrease of 900, use increased by 2,233 compared to 1977.

In Vermont, records for eight of the Green Mountain Club's (GMC) shelters for the months of July and August show use peaking in 1975. Then a downward trend began. GMC off-

The only other activity that has captured this increasingly large share of the total national forest system recreation use market is winter sports. It increased from 3.5 percent in 1966, to 3.8 percent in 1970, to 4.7 percent in 1975, to 6.6 percent in 1979. Projections indicate that snow-based activities will continue to dominate the growth scene in the 1980's, followed closely by water and then land-based activities.

The overall long-term trends seem to confirm the folk wisdom that hiking and backcountry

use have been increasing over the past decade, but that they may be stabilizing. It is clear that year to year trends do not show any consistency from one recreation area to another, but that over the long-term, most areas have experienced this growth and leveling-off.

The causes for the levels of use and their changes over time are not at all clear. It is a complex interaction of available leisure time, money, accessibility, faddism and more. Each individual processes these variables and makes his decision to go hiking or not. Moreover, this long-term pattern of growth and its more recent leveling-off does not in itself presage future use levels. The leveling-off may continue, dip into a long-term downtrend or merely mark a hesitation in longer term growth. One year does not make a trend. Even two or three years do not. The year-to-year changes are as likely to be in one direction as in the other.

One of the shops in this marketplace is the publishing business. Magazines and books about this subject can be found in almost any bookstore. This was not so a decade or two ago. Publishers such as Scribners, Funk and Wagnalls, Harper and Row, and many others are answering the demand for books on hiking and backpacking. Periodicals such as Appalachia Bulletin, Sierra Club Bulletin, and Living Wilderness have been joined by Backpacker/Wilderness Camping, Mariah, New England Outdoors and Nordic Skiing. Tote books, walk books, and hike books describe thousands of hikes people can take in just about every state in the Nation.

Other shops in this marketplace are the equipment industry and outfitters. Where once hiking and backpacking equipment could be obtained only in large cities or through a few mail-order houses, now many hardware stores carry equipment, many small towns have a sporting goods store and the long-established mail-

Table 2.--National forest recreation use by activity
(thousands of visitor-days)

Activity	-----1966-----		-----1979-----	
	Use	Percent of Total	Use	Percent of Total
Camping	39,564.5	26.2	54,780.3	24.9
Recreational travel (mechanical)	31,301.1	20.7	49,536.5	22.5
Fishing	14,709.1	9.7	16,776.0	7.6
Hunting	13,118.6	8.7	15,327.9	6.7
Recreational residence use	7,960.5	5.3	6,651.6	3.0
Picnicking	7,887.5	5.2	8,874.2	4.0
Winter sports	5,219.6	3.5	14,485.0	6.6
Hiking & mountain climbing	4,277.8	2.8	11,176.9	5.1
Organizational camp use	4,287.2	2.8	4,086.8	1.8
Boating	4,006.5	2.6	7,072.1	3.2
Viewing scenes & sports entertainment	3,926.8	2.6	8,321.1	3.8
Resort use	4,003.5	2.6	4,308.9	1.9
Swimming & scuba diving	3,076.9	2.0	4,632.3	2.1
Horseback riding	2,065.9	1.4	3,166.4	1.4
Visitors information services	2,058.8	1.4	4,121.8	1.9
Gather forest products	1,241.7	.8	3,916.1	1.8
Nature study	796.4	.5	1,210.9	.5
Waterskiing & other water sports	641.0	.4	888.0	.4
Games & team sports	585.5	.4	832.8	.4
Total	150,728.9	99.6	220,165.6	99.6

So how does one find indicators of national hiking and backpacking trends, accurately assess them, and meaningfully interpret what they tell us? One way might be to check the marketplace--the place that might profit from an increase in hiking and backcountry interest.

order houses are under severe competition from hundreds of newly-established businesses. Similarly, perusal of any hiking or backpacking magazine invariably provides one with numerous opportunities for signing up with backcountry and wilderness outfitters. All these entrepreneurs have recognized an expanding market

and, in the American tradition, are here to satisfy the demand for these goods and services.

A third way to conjure hiking and backpacking trends is to consult with a panel of people "in the know". If nothing more, this technique should tell us how much agreement or disagreement there is about the future.

James Kern, president of the American Hiking Society, recognizes that the bloom is off the hiking fad, that membership in hiking organizations is not increasing at the same rate it was a few years ago, but that people joining clubs these days are probably doing so after making a more sincere appraisal of their interest in hiking and the individual club.

William Kemsley, Jr., editor of Backpacker/Wilderness Camping magazine also sees only a slight yearly increase in the number of hikers and backpackers. But he foresees a definite increase in snowshoeing, ski camping and family backpacking. As we get more and more into the 1980's, he sees greater interest in "group" camping in the backcountry and use of leantos, shelters, and White Mountain-type "huts".

David A. Richie, project manager of the Appalachian Trail for the NPS, sees an expanding role for volunteers in protection and management of trails and an increase in the responsibilities of trail clubs. He sees them helping decide where trails will go, what land will be bought, and monitoring activities of visitors and landowners to head off conflicts. He also sees them expanding their presence on trails to educate and influence hikers and backpackers on compatible behavior, and taking on added maintenance and construction work, even offering to replace government crews in national parks and forests.

William E. Rennebohm, the Trails Coordinator of the HCRS sees greater use of urban trails, multi-purpose trails, and health or exercise trails. He also feels that low-cost public transportation to distant trails is not beyond the realm of possibilities.

There seems to be general agreement that hiking and backcountry use has experienced a short-term shot in the arm, that the immediate effects of that shot are wearing off, and that the growth rate in this activity will be much less dramatic for the next few years. In summary, we see the American experience paralleling the European experience in pedestrian activity. We see more day hiking and more families hiking. We see more general awareness of walking in our lifestyle, even a trend toward walking as a legitimate mode of trans-

portation for short commutes. We see more of an emphasis on development of the 50- to 250-mile trails rather than on the 1000-mile and over trails; and less emphasis on trail studies and more on-the-ground trail developments.

It seems clear that management policies which are designed to manage use, do in fact have that result. For example, the AMC Hut System, where it has become more and more important to make a reservation to assure oneself a bunk, does not exhibit the dramatic year to year shifts in use that the AMC shelters show. Likewise, Baxter Park's policy restricting use and the Allagash Waterway's policies for discouraging overuse.

Managers and recreationists, for the past decade, have had to cope with the problems posed by rapid increases in use. This has forced difficult decisions, sometimes necessarily made without much data. The problem has been to protect the resource in the face of this increased use. The opportunity now is at hand to review these decisions in the light of experience without the problem of immediate increases and to take stock. Which policies have been successful; which less so? What options should be pursued to make the next decade a successful one for both managers and recreationists?