

# AN AGING POPULATION: RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHICS, MOTIVATIONS AND PARTICIPATION

---

Karen Robinson, Graduate Student  
Recreation, Parks and Tourism Resources Program  
Division of Forestry, PO Box 6125  
West Virginia University  
Morgantown, WV 26506  
krobin12@mix.wvu.edu

Robert C. Burns, Assistant Professor  
West Virginia University

Chad D. Pierskalla, Associate Professor  
West Virginia University

Alan Graefe, Associate Professor  
Pennsylvania State University

---

**Abstract.**—The purpose of this study was to examine the outdoor recreation behavior of Oregon’s aging population, including developing a socio-demographic profile and examining the importance of their current motivations with the importance of their expected motivations 10 years from now. A stratified random sample was drawn of Oregon residents, and a mail-back questionnaire was chosen to sample those individuals. This study shows that Oregon’s aging population shares many characteristics with older people described in previous recreation literature. However, this study contradicts the notion that this cohort will pursue more adventurous activities than past generations.

---

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Recreation is often a vital part of one’s quality of life. People living in today’s society often work longer hours and have more constraints on their time. For recreational professionals, it has always been a challenge to provide those opportunities that the general population demands. This includes making sure that recreationists have a quality experience and leave satisfied.

Today, recreation managers and researchers are faced with influential shifts in recreation sectors. These include the population increase in ethnic groups (U.S. Census, 2004), and the decrease in outdoor recreation participation as individuals age, particularly with regard to physical demanding activities (Kelly, 1980). This paper focuses on the aging population, and specifically the baby boomer cohort. Baby boomers have been described as very individualistic, competitive free agents with a high interest in self-fulfillment through personal growth (Parker & Chusmir, 1990), as well as confident, ambitious, and progressive in attitude (Clever & Muller, 2002). In addition, this cohort also has been depicted as recognizing their time as a precious commodity, are known to work hard, play hard and spend hard (Ziegler, 2002), and are living longer, having lower rates of disability, and achieving higher levels of education (U. S. Census, 2006) than previous generations.

As of 2005, the baby boomer cohort comprised 78.2 million people or approximately 26 percent of the U.S. population (U.S. Census, 2006). About half of the baby boomers are women. In 2006, the oldest of the baby boomer cohort celebrated 60th birthdays. Because this cohort makes up such a substantial proportion of the U.S. population, recreation managers and researchers turned their focus toward this now-aging population. Furthermore, with the influence that this cohort has had on our nation previously, agency managers are deliberating on how they will influence recreational facilities and services in the future.

The Oregon Parks and Recreation Department (OPRD) is presently planning efforts to provide pertinent, useable research findings to apply to their 2008-2014 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) (<http://egov.oregon.gov/OPRD/PLANS/SCORP.shtml>). Results from the 2003-2007 Oregon SCORP and the 2005-2014 Oregon Non-motorized Trail Plan identified influential demographic shifts,

such as an increasingly diverse population, decline in youth learning outdoor skills, an increase in levels of physical inactivity, and an aging population. These findings brought to light crucial information that is needed for outdoor recreation agencies to examine and address how this changing population may influence outdoor recreation facilities and services in Oregon.

In 2005, the OPRD initiated a partnership between the OPRD, U.S. Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Region, Oregon Tourism Commission, Oregon Economic and Community Development Department and a host of university researchers to design a study to allow Oregon state recreation agencies to provide proactive measures and to plan accordingly for the aging population to retain their relevance to these important demographic groups.

### **1.1 Objectives of the Study**

This paper focuses on the socio-demographic profile and the examination of the importance of the aging population's current motivations in comparison with their expected motivations 10 years from now. This study is part of a larger effort that also examined the increase in ethnic populations, a decrease in youth experiencing the outdoors, and health related factors of outdoor recreation participation. Because of changes that may occur in an individual's situation, health, environment, or life circumstances over time, the information about expected outdoor recreation motivations in 10 years should be considered speculative.

## **2.0 METHODOLOGY**

Oregon residents were given the opportunity to provide input to the Oregon SCORP assessment through a mail survey. A stratified random sample of respondents was drawn from a database provided by the Oregon DMV. A mail-back questionnaire was chosen to sample those individuals who were between 42 and 60 years of age resulting in a sample size of 538.

Data gathered from this study will allow agency managers to strategically plan for this cohort's onset

of retirement and better understand how they may influence the demand for outdoor recreation in order to remain relevant to this population. These findings will also verify the characteristics of the aging population found in the literature regarding health, activity type, financial capability, education level, and distinctiveness.

## **3.0 RESULTS**

### **3.1 Socio-demographic Profile**

Through this study, a socio-demographic profile was created to advance an awareness of the aging population and how their socio-demographic makeup relates to their outdoor recreation behavior. The overarching goal of profile development was to provide researchers with a greater understanding of this population that would afford resource managers with the ability to manage appropriately for this unique population. The respondents in this sample were asked to report their socio-demographic characteristics, such as age, how old they perceive themselves, gender, education, retirement status, number of members in their household, ethnicity, annual income, current health, expected health in the future, and disability. This paper focuses on seven of these demographic variables to describe the aging population: age, gender, education, retirement status, annual income, current health, and disability (Table 1).

A majority of the survey population was female (55.0 percent). Just under one-third of the respondents (32.7 percent) were in the age category of 56 to 60 years of age, while a substantial proportion (30.1 percent) of the respondents was between 51 and 55 years. Similarly, those respondents in the category of 50 years old or younger comprised just over one-third (37.2 percent) of the sample. The mean age of the respondents included in this analysis was 52 years. When respondents were asked if they were currently retired, 80.6 percent reported that they were not yet retired. Just under one-fifth (19.4 percent) stated that they were already retired.

Respondents were asked to report the highest level of education that they have received, and the response

**Table 1.—Socio-demographic profile of respondents**

	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	242	45.0
Female	296	55.0
Total	538	100.0
Age		
42 to 45	91	16.9
46 to 50	109	20.3
51 to 55	162	30.1
56 to 60	176	32.7
Total	538	100.0
Mean	52	
Currently Retired		
Yes	103	19.4
No	428	80.6
Total	531	100.0
Education		
High school or less	94	17.6
Some college, but no degree	166	31.1
Associate or bachelor degree	196	36.7
Graduate degree	78	14.6
Total	534	100.0

categories ranged from high school or less to having a graduate degree. Just under one-third (31 percent) stated that they had attended college, but did not receive a degree, while a third (36.7 percent) of the respondents reported having an associate's degree or bachelor's degree. Almost one-fifth (17.6 percent) of the respondents reported having an education level of high school or less and 15 percent have earned a graduate degree.

The respondents were asked to report their annual household income before taxes as well as income from all household members including: pensions, interest, dividends, and any other source of income. The results showed that their annual income ranged between less than \$10,000 to more than \$150,000. About one-fifth of the respondents (22 percent) reported their total annual household income as \$34,999 or under, while another 22 percent reported their annual income in the range between \$35,000 and \$49,999. Just under one-quarter of the respondents (24.7 percent) reported their income to be in the range of \$50,000 to \$74,999, and the greatest proportion of the respondents (31.6 percent) stated that their annual income was \$75,000 or more.

The last two remaining socio-demographic characteristics this thesis focused on were the respondents' current health and whether or not they or someone in their household had a disability. The vast majority of the respondents (89.9 percent) felt that their current health was good (32.6 percent), very good (36.4 percent), or excellent (20.9 percent). Only 10.0 percent of the respondents perceived their current health to be fair or poor. Almost three-fourths (74.5 percent) of the respondents reported that no one in the household, including themselves, had a disability. A sizable proportion (12.5 percent) of the respondents reported that they did not have a disability, but someone else in their household did have a disability. Correspondingly, 13.1 percent reported that they personally had a disability.

### 3.2 Comparison of Current and Expected Motivations

A paired t-test was utilized to examine if there were any differences in respondents' motivations when comparing their current motivations with their expected motivations ten years from now. Although many changes may take place within a person's life in ten years, these results will provide a basis for what the aging population is projecting as their motivations at this time. A 5-point Likert scale was used where 1 = not at all important to 5 = very important. Respondents were then asked to rate their level of importance on the same motivation items for their expected motivations in ten years, using the same 5-point Likert scale (Table 2).

Of the 16 motivation item pairs, 11 pairs revealed significance differences in the mean scores of respondents' importance ratings between current and expected motivations. Those items included *to keep fit and healthy* ( $t = -10.780$ ), *to meet new people* ( $t = -9.722$ ), *to be with family and friends* ( $t = -4.326$ ), *to do something your children or grandchildren enjoy* ( $t = -7.673$ ), *to learn something new* ( $t = -5.601$ ), *to expose your children or grandchildren to something new* ( $t = -6.129$ ), *to feel safe and secure* ( $t = -3.819$ ), *to achieve spiritual fulfillment* ( $t = -3.191$ ), *to feel harmony with nature* ( $t = -2.341$ ), *to reduce tension* ( $t = 3.744$ ) and *to escape the daily routine* ( $t = 4.634$ ).

**Table 2. Comparison of current and expected future motivations**

	Current	Expected	n	t	p
	Motivations	Motivations			
	Mean				
To relax	4.30	4.31	515	-.321	.748
To keep fit and healthy	4.12	4.42	512	-10.780	.000***
To experience challenge and excitement	3.16	3.17	513	-.464	.643
To have fun	4.51	4.53	513	-.962	.336
To meet new people	2.51	2.81	511	-9.722	.000***
To be with family and friends	4.09	4.20	512	-4.326	.000***
To do something your children or grandchildren enjoy	3.73	4.01	489	-7.673	.000***
To reduce tension	3.99	3.85	516	3.774	.000***
To learn something new	3.24	3.43	506	-5.601	.000***
To expose your children or grandchildren to something new	3.45	3.70	486	-6.129	.000***
To escape the daily routine	4.00	3.81	511	4.634	.000***
To get away from crowded situations	4.02	4.02	515	.142	.887
To be in the outdoors	4.47	4.47	517	-.200	.842
To feel harmony with nature	3.78	3.83	512	-2.341	.020*
To achieve spiritual fulfillment	3.17	3.23	509	-3.191	.002*
To feel safe and secure	3.25	3.35	510	-3.819	.000***

Note. Response scale is 1 = not at all important to 5 = very important  
 \*p < .05 \*\*\*p < .001

Of those motivation items that illustrate significance between current and expected importance, mean scores were higher for expected motivations than current motivations, except for two: to reduce tension and to escape the daily routine. This finding provides insight as to how respondents' motivations may be affected by their retirement.

#### 4.0 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper was to examine if there were any significant differences between respondents' current motivations for engaging in outdoor recreation and their expected motivations in 10 years. Through a better understanding of why the aging population participates in outdoor recreation, natural resource managers will be better prepared for the onset of the aging population's retirement. This information will also allow for natural resource agencies to be more aligned with demands of the cohort's preferences and needs of outdoor recreation.

Several studies have reported characteristics and provided forecasts of older peoples' outdoor recreation behavior as they near retirement as well as into their

retirement years. Ziegler (2002) suggested that the aging population is known to work hard, play hard, and spend hard. The present study revealed that a sizable portion of the aging population earn \$50,000 or more annually, have no disabilities, and perceive their health as being in good or excellent condition. The aging population has been depicted as living longer, having lower rates of disability, and achieving higher levels of education, (U. S. Census, 2006), and this study's findings provide further evidence for these trends. Findings from this study revealed that the greater proportion of the respondents earned a bachelor's or graduate degree.

This study finds that the respondents are a bellwether for the aging population in Oregon. The respondents do participate in and plan to continue participating in recreation activities at a high rate. The survey participants want to have fun, be amongst family and friends, mainly in an outdoor recreation setting. This population has already developed their circles of friends; their recreation participation pattern has been developed and their activities have been selected.

In 1988, Shelby, Bregenzer and Johnson conducted a study regarding displacement and product shift due to increasing use levels on Oregon and Illinois rivers. The authors noted that there was evidence suggesting backcountry use has declined, yet suggested it may be temporary. The authors further suggested that the baby boom generation that lead the backcountry use trend in the 60s and 70s may return to this experience once their children are older. This study counters this claim, and suggests that older people will seek less adventurous activities in more local settings.

More recently, preliminary results of the National Visitor Use Monitoring study (<http://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/nvum/>) show a decline in recreation use nationally, as well as in the Pacific Northwest, over the past 5 years. The Gifford Pinchot National Forest reported a drop in visitor use estimates of approximately one-third, while the Siuslaw National Forest reported a 50 percent decline in visitor use estimates. The Mt. Hood National Forest, located near Portland, OR, reported a decline of more than 50 percent. Interestingly, the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area (CRGNSA), also located near Portland, between the Gifford Pinchot and Mt. Hood National Forests, reported a slight increase in visitor use estimates. This finding suggests that visitors are not making the long treks to the backcountry for recreation, but are choosing areas that have easy access and are close to home. This overall finding of a decline in recreation use at back-country national forests, and a slight increase in an “urban” forest parallels the finding in this thesis that older people are seeking recreation opportunities that are perhaps more often provided by state and local recreation agencies.

The crux of this change in recreation use is that outdoor recreation, particularly those activities and services historically provided by local and state recreation providers, are highly important to resource managers. People who are healthy now want to utilize recreation facilities and services to remain healthy. People who are not healthy and persons impacted by disabilities also want to make use of outdoor recreation facilities to make their lives better. Although the findings of this study speak to gender differences

(women desire more walking opportunities, men desire golfing opportunities), level of education is more important in the type of activity one chooses.

#### **4.1 Management Implications**

These findings have some important management implications. One of the primary jobs of natural resource managers is to plan for future recreation use. Often, it takes an extended period of time to implement strategic plans, which means that managers have a real need to understand what recreation opportunities will be sought by older people in the future. Although we can not definitively predict future preferences and outdoor recreation behavior, the analyses of respondents’ current and expected motivations provides resource managers with baseline data about an important segment of our society so that they can take necessary actions to address the needs of this group. With continuous budget constraints and reductions for recreation facilities and services, managers must be prepared to make hard decisions about what facilities and services should be reduced in concert with future non-use. This information has the ability to facilitate strategic planning, thus enabling managers to remain relevant to the aging population in the future.

#### **4.2 Recommendations for Future Research**

Previous literature characterizes the aging population as unique in their outdoor recreation behavior and lifestyle. Further research is needed at a national level in order to serve the aging population and identify outdoor recreation trends. This study focused on the aging population in Oregon; however, it is just as important to identify differences throughout the nation for a more informed understanding of how this population will differ from past cohorts.

Motivations for outdoor recreation can provide a deeper understanding of one’s outdoor recreation behavior and preferences. In examining motivations of the aging population, there needs to be further consideration of the motivation items that are utilized. These motivation items should come from empirical

findings and reflect characteristics of this population. In addition, satisfaction should also be addressed in future studies in order to better understand if the aging population is satisfied with their experience and attainment of benefits.

Further research into how this unique cohort will influence facilities and services is needed so that outdoor recreation managers will have appropriate information as to how planning efforts should be prioritized. Longitudinal studies would be beneficial in uncovering trends of this cohort. The present study is beneficial in that it provides a starting point for what managers can expect, especially for those baby boomers that are on the verge of retirement at this time. However, longitudinal studies could examine the youngest of the cohort to better identify trends and monitor their outdoor recreation behavior.

More information is needed to understand the type of facilities and services preferred by older recreationists, how facilities and services affect a person's outdoor recreation participation, and how managers should plan for future recreation by older people. For example, this study showed that walking is a popular activity and that older people prefer to have access to trails and parks close to home. Are there differences between different geographical locations (rural, suburban and urban) regarding the type of facilities desired? Managers may also be able to gain insight into this cohort's outdoor recreation behavior through looking into memberships they hold and knowing which state and local parks and recreation departments they use. This information could be used to develop valuable partnerships and provide information in addition to research findings. These partnerships could foster quality recreation experiences as well as providing outlets and opportunities to engage users who may be otherwise constrained.

This study, as well as the larger study from which it was derived, has the potential to be an opportunistic tool for outdoor recreation managers as they inventory their recreation areas and known visitor information. With the demographic shifts that are taking place in today's society, it is important that managers not

only understand the differences between different demographic groups (i.e. aging population vs. youth vs. ethnicity), but be able to apply that information to their planning efforts in order to connect users with the resources they prefer

## 5.0 CITATIONS

- Cleaver, M., & Muller, T.E. (2002). **The socially aware baby boomer: Gaining a lifestyle-based understanding of the new wave ecotourists.** *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 10(3), 173-190.
- Kelly, J.R. (1980). **Outdoor recreation participation: A comparative analysis.** *Leisure Sciences*, 3(2), 129-154.
- National Visitor Use Monitoring** (2007). Retrieved August 5, 2007, from <http://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/nvum/>
- Parker, B., & Chusmir, L., (1990). **A generational and sex-based view of managerial work values.** *Psychological Report*, 66, 947-950.
- U.S. Census. (2004). **The face of our population.** Retrieved March 25, 2006, from [http://factfinder.census.gov/jsp/staff/SAFFInfo.jsp?\\_pageId=tp9\\_race\\_ethnicity](http://factfinder.census.gov/jsp/staff/SAFFInfo.jsp?_pageId=tp9_race_ethnicity)
- U.S. Census. (2006). **Impact of baby boomers anticipated.** Retrieved March 16, 2006, from [http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/aging\\_population/006544.html](http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/aging_population/006544.html)
- U.S. Census. (2006). **Oldest baby boomers turn 60!** Retrieved March 15, 2006, from [http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/facts\\_for\\_features\\_special\\_editions/006105.html](http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_editions/006105.html)
- Ziegler, J. (2002). **Recreating retirement: How will baby boomers reshape leisure in their 60s?** *Parks and Recreation*, October, pp. 56-61.