

Article

Characteristics and Use Patterns of Outdoor Recreationists on Public Lands in Alabama—Case Study of Bankhead National Forest and Sipsey Wilderness Area

Colmore S. Christian * and Chelsea N. Scott

Forestry, Ecology and Wildlife Program, Alabama A&M University, Normal, AL 35762, USA;
cscott616@yahoo.com

* Correspondence: colmore.christian@aamu.edu

Abstract: Like many other states in south-east USA, Alabama is blessed with a high percentage of natural areas. These areas support vital nature tourism and the outdoor recreation sector. This study was undertaken at the Bankhead National Forest (BNF) and Sipsey Wilderness Area (SWA), significant hubs for outdoor recreation in northwestern Alabama. The goal of this study was to collect baseline information that could be used to develop tools and strategies for increasing the diversity of users participating in outdoor recreation at BNF/SWA. A pretested questionnaire was administered to visitors at eight outdoor recreation sites in the BNF/SWA. Adults encountered at study locations were invited, after their visit, to participate in the study. The study found that (a) the majority of visitors to the BNF/SWA were Caucasians and the least encountered race was African American; (b) the most common reason for visiting BNF/SWA was for family outings, whereas activities with friends or coworkers were the second most important reason for visiting; (c) hiking (39.6%), camping (29.1%), picnicking (23.3%), and horseback riding (22.5%) were the most popular outdoor recreation activities pursued by visitors. It was concluded that a study aimed at identifying the constraints which negatively impact the use of the BNF/SWA by minorities should be a critical step in the process of trying to diversify the BNF/SWA's user base. Increased efforts must be made to identify the reasons for the low usage of the BNF/SWA by minorities.

Keywords: Bankhead National Forest; Sipsey Wilderness Area; outdoor recreation; Alabama; public lands; characteristics of recreationists; use patterns



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1. Introduction

Outdoor recreation has become an integral part of the American lifestyle. Recent evidence suggests that outdoor recreation has become one of the most important uses of national forests [1]. However, ethnic groups do not equally participate in outdoor recreation. Generally, several minority groups encounter more constraints to participating in outdoor recreation activities today than they did ten years ago [2]. The USA's population has been experiencing profound demographic changes during the last 50 years. The aging of the population and the rapid growth of ethnic minorities, particularly Hispanics and African Americans, are among these profound demographic changes.

A nationwide online survey of approximately 20,000 outdoor participants found that 70% of outdoor activity participants in 2013 were Caucasians [3]. African Americans and Hispanic Americans had the lowest outdoor recreation participation rates, at 11 and eight percent, respectively [3]. Sixty percent of outdoor activity participants were over the age of 25, and participants between the ages of 24 and 51 had the most outings per year. Interestingly, while Hispanic Americans had the lowest outdoor activity participation rates, those who participated had the highest number of annual tours amongst the race/ethnic groups surveyed [3].

In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, 72% of outdoor participants in the USA were Caucasians. This was compared to a six percent participation rate among Asian Americans, nine percent among African Americans, and 11% among Hispanics. Only Hispanics reflected a slight increase in the outdoor participation rate in 2020 [4].

Racial and ethnic groups utilize outdoor recreation areas in different ways. While Americans in one study generally favored biking, running, fishing, and camping as the most popular outdoor recreation activities, each racial/ethnic group participated in these and other activities at varying levels [3]. Asian/Pacific Islanders and Caucasians rated hiking as a favorite activity, while African Americans didn't list hiking among their preferences [3]. Alternatively, a few African Americans listed bird/wildlife watching as a favorite activity, whereas this activity didn't appear on any other groups' list of popular activities [3].

Running, jogging, and trail running were the activities participated in most by African Americans, Asian/Pacific Islanders, Caucasians, and Hispanics [3]. Another study found that Caucasians were significantly more likely than African Americans to participate in hiking, nature observation, picnicking, and relaxing outdoors [5]. A 2002 study found that African Americans, Latinos, and Asians were more engaged in outdoor activities which involved socializing, such as festivals and sports. Asians indicated volleyball and golf as popular sports, and Latinos were most active in swimming [6]. Another study on Hispanics, African Americans, and Asians revealed the common preference for family-oriented outdoor activities instead of solitary experiences [7].

Studies done in many parts of the United States have shown that demographics, ethnicity, and race influence the use of natural environments by different social, ethnic, and racial groups. It is speculated that the pattern of participation in nature-based tourism and outdoor recreation activities at the BNF/SWA is similarly influenced by the characteristics of users. The services currently offered and opportunities presented at natural areas may be 'unintentionally' biased towards selected racial and ethnic groups to the exclusion of other groups. Thus, an understanding of visitation patterns, the characteristics, ethnicity, and race of visitors, and the factors that may inhibit certain social groups' participation should be of importance to BNF/SWA's management. Such an understanding will aid in implementing programs and strategies to foster higher levels of minority participation and engender more support for public land management goals [8].

The main objective of this study was to determine BNF/SWA's visitors' characteristics, ethnicity, race, and use patterns. The USDA Forest Service continuously collects visitor satisfaction information and periodic data on visitor use activities at BNF/SWA [9]. However, data analyses specific to Alabama are readily and widely available. Primary research is needed to determine detailed information about visitors, their use patterns and participation levels, and identification of constraints to the use of natural resources by marginalized ethnic groups. Information on such matters and information on the dynamics of changes in these parameters over time are required by resource managers and policymakers to develop and implement programs aimed at promoting more equitable use of public lands by all social, ethnic, and racial groups. Such information is also required to plan and manage outdoor recreation use [10] effectively. This study seeks, among other things, to address, in part, the issue of data scarcity as well as to contribute to management and policy direction recommendations.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. The Study Site

Alabama's rich and diversified natural resources, some of which are within the boundaries of the Bankhead National Forest (BNF) and Sipsey Wilderness Area (SWA), present unique opportunities for outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism. The 447,244.9 hectares (181,000 acres) BNF together with the 61,774.2 hectares (25,000 acres) Sipsey Wilderness Area (SWA), located in the northern part of the state, cover 0.5% and 0.07%, respectively, of Alabama's land area (Figure 1). Outdoor recreation activities such as

camping, boating, hunting, swimming, hiking, equestrian use, ATV use, nature observation, and wilderness experience are offered at the BNF/SWA area.

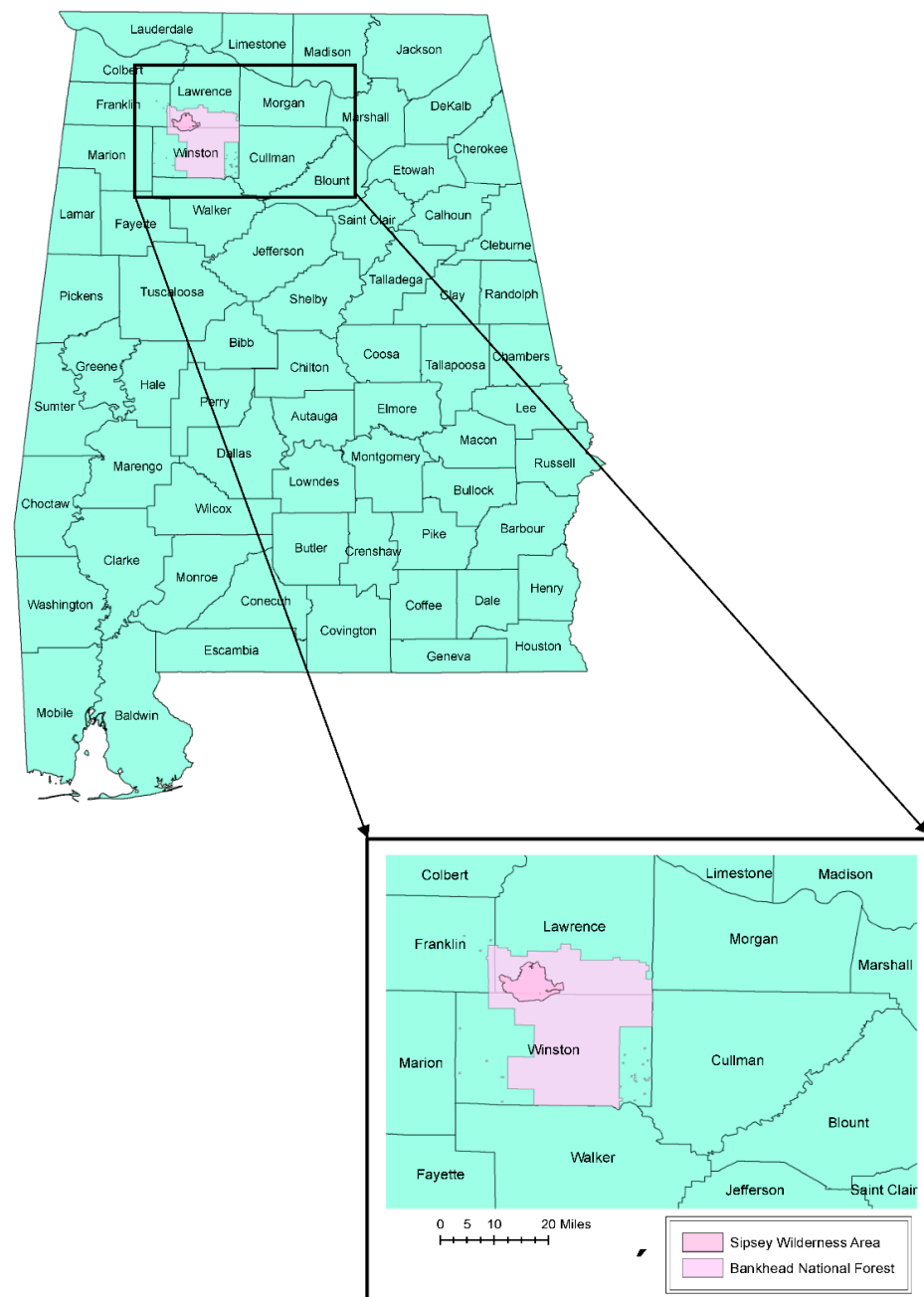


Figure 1. Location of the Bankhead National Forest and Sipsey Wilderness Area in Alabama.

The use of the BNF/SWA and other similar natural resources for outdoor recreation activities results in significant social, spiritual, and economic benefits to the State and the nation. The State's natural heritage base, coupled with other complementary climatic features, makes it attractive as a tourism and outdoor recreation destination as well as a retirement location. The growing demand for nature-based tourism and outdoor recreation services has stimulated much socio-economic development in the state and nationally. In 2014, the tourism and travel industry generated approximately \$768 million in state and local tax revenues and resulted in 167,273 jobs, according to Alabama's Tourism Department [11]. Within just the Black Belt region, the total economic impact of outdoor recreation activities such as hunting and fishing reached almost \$1 billion [12].

2.2. Data Collection

This study's starting point was the available USDA Forest Service data on visitor demographics and visitor use patterns. Functional data were evaluated and supplemented by a questionnaire survey and discussions with representatives of the stakeholders. The questionnaire's structure was based on approaches recommended by Dillman [13,14] and informed by pretest and focus group results. The BNF/SWA served as the general geographic location for the study. However, the specific study location selections were based on an analysis of the site characteristics, outdoor recreation opportunities, the range of available services, and the recommendations of knowledgeable professionals working in the area.

Based on the approach outlined in the preceding paragraph, visitors to eight outdoor recreation sites within BNF/SWA were surveyed. The sites selected were: Sipsey River Picnic Area, Flint Creek Trail, Clear Creek, McDougle Camp, Owl Creek, Hurricane Creek Shooting Range, Borden Creek, and Brushy Lake (Figure 2). The questionnaires were administered at each site over three days—two weekend days (i.e., Saturday and Sunday) and one workday (i.e., Monday through Friday). Adults (i.e., persons 19 years or older) encountered at study locations were invited to participate in the study, generally after the visit. Participants had the flexibility of either sitting in the comfort of their vehicles or remaining in the open to complete the questionnaire. Collaboration with others was discouraged. However, some level of cooperation was observed in some instances. Questionnaires, distributed by either the researchers or senior forestry work-study students, were self-administered and completed on-site. A total of 227 completed questionnaires were returned.



Figure 2. The spatial distribution of BNF/SWA sites (*) where questionnaires were administered (Sources: ESRI, USGS).

2.3. Data Analysis

Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) (version 23) and Excel were used to generate descriptive statistics parameters of the data.

3. Results and Discussions

Several interesting results from this study are presented and discussed in this subsection of the paper. The ethnic mix, the types of visiting groups, the age ranges of visitors, and the popular recreational and leisure pursuits of visitors are presented and discussed.

3.1. Racial/Ethnic Composition of Visitors and Their Preferred Activities

Of the 227 completed questionnaires, Caucasians [206 (90.7%)] were the largest racial group, followed by American Indian/Alaskan natives [11 (4.8%)], Asians [3 (1.3%)], and African American [2 (0.9%)] (Table 1). American Indian [69 (30.4%)] was the largest ethnic group, followed by persons of multiple ethnicities [39 (17.2%)], Irish [17 (7.5%)], and Germans [14 (6.2%)] (Table 2). There was no significant difference ($p = 0.05$) between males and females regarding race or ethnicity. It was not surprising that Caucasians were the largest racial group identified at BNF/SWA. Despite changing population demographics, data suggest that people of color do not visit national parks and outdoor recreation sites as frequently as Caucasians [15].

Table 1. Total numbers and races of visitors to the BNF/SWA.

Racial Group	Number of Visitors	Percentage of Total Visitors (%)
Caucasian	206	90.7
American Indian/Alaskan Native	11	4.8
Asian	3	1.3
African American	2	0.9
Missing Information.	5	2.2

Table 2. Major ethnic groups which use the BNF/SWA.

Ethnicity	Number of Visitors	Percentage of Total Visitors (%)
American Indian	69	30.4
Multiple Ethnicities	39	17.2
Irish	17	7.5
German	14	6.2
British	7	3.1
African American	2	0.9
Italian	2	0.9

Caucasian visitors to BNF/SWA participated in several outdoor recreation activities such as horseback riding, hunting, shooting practice, camping, and fishing. The two African Americans surveyed only participated in hiking and picnicking activities.

Visitors' outdoor recreation choices are influenced, in part, by the visitors' life experiences and motivations for visiting the sites. Life experiences are, in fact, closely related to visitors' ethnic and cultural backgrounds. These characteristics also influence how visitors behave spatially at recreation sites. However, as Sisneros-Kidd et al. [16] have noted, the available activity type coupled with the outdoor recreation sites' features is very influential on visitors' use of and behavior in the outdoors.

3.2. Visiting Group Patterns

The most common reason for visiting the BNF/SWA was for family outings (Figure 3). Activities with friends or coworkers were identified as the second most important reason. These results are similar to those obtained by Christian et al. [17], who found that 52.4% of visitors to a couple of national park sites on the Caribbean island nation of Dominica were family groups, and 29.9% were peer groups/clubs. Interestingly, school/college and church/religious groups were poorly represented (<2%) among visitors to the BNF/SWA. There are 121 high schools within the seven counties closest to the BNF/SWA (Table 3). More educationally connected visiting groups, particularly from high schools, were anticipated in light of the emphasis on extra-curricular activities and the growing state-wide focus on health and wellness within the school system.

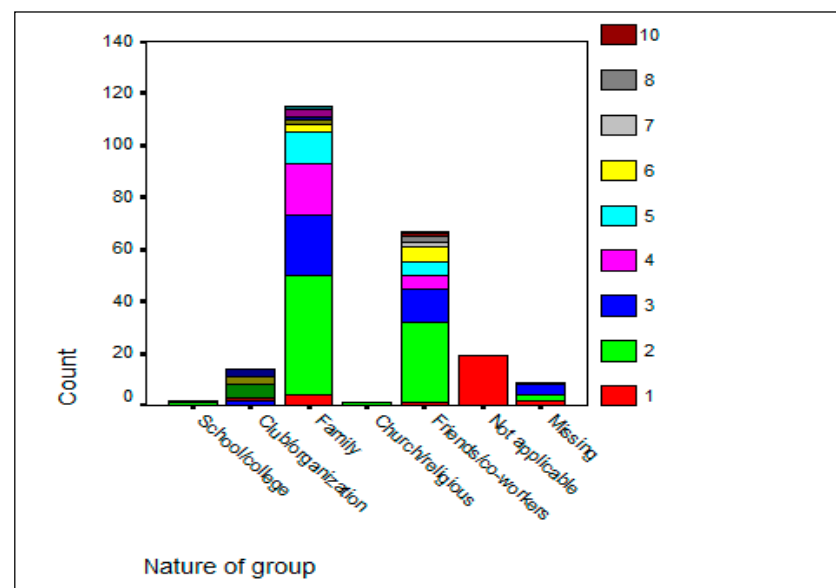


Figure 3. Graph reflecting the structure and composition of visiting groups to the BNF/SWA.

Table 3. High schools, other tertiary-level institutions, and churches located within the seven counties adjacent to Bankhead National Forest and Sipsey Wilderness Area [18–20].

Counties	# High Schools	# Community Colleges	# 4-Year Institutions	# Churches
Lawrence	13	0	0	107
Winston	9	0	0	92
Franklin	9	1	0	139
Walker	25	1	0	239
Cullman	26	1	0	250
Morgan	30	0	0	208
Marion	9	1	0	141
Totals	121	4	0	1176

One possible reason for the low number of visits by high school groups may be the constraints on high school field trip budgets. Many schools do not have the funds to travel off-site [21]. There are no four-year colleges and only four community/technical colleges within the seven counties adjacent to the BNF/SWA. This may account for the low number of college-related visiting groups (Figure 3). The virtual absence (<2% participation) of church/religious groups was also surprising, given the existence of a large number of churches in the state and mindful of the “... shaping influence of religion and spirituality

on the relationships, values, vocation, identity, beliefs, and well-being of young people” [19]. In fact, there was an average of 168 churches per county in the seven-county sub-grouping referenced earlier. There was a total of 1176 churches in the sub-grouping (Table 3).

3.3. Age Ranges of Visitors to BNF/SWA

All visitors of Asian ethnicity were within the 20–29 year age group, whereas the ages of American Indian/Alaskan Native visitors were somewhat evenly distributed among the 20–29, 30–39, and 50–59 year groups. There was also a relatively even distribution of Caucasian visitors by age group (Figure 4). This distribution appears to be consistent with national averages despite the relatively small sample size. Nationally, Caucasian outdoor recreation participants were relatively evenly distributed across most age groups, and Asians were more active among the younger age groups.

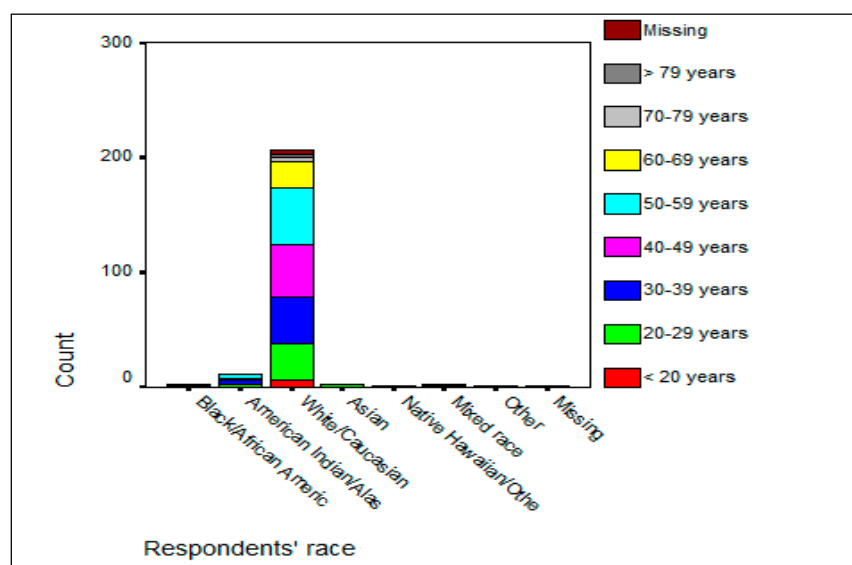


Figure 4. Graph reflecting the age range of visitors of different ethnicity/races to the BNF/SWA.

In 2013, Caucasians had a participation rate of approximately 60% for persons aged 13–17, 18–24, and 25–44, with participants over 45 years of age having a participation rate of 40% [22]. This same report also revealed that the most active adult age groups for Asians were 18–24 and 25–44, with 53% and 52% participation rates, respectively. A 2003 study of American Indian use of national forests in which researchers interviewed residents who were already known to use the woods found that forest users and outdoor recreation participants were between the ages of 20 and 77 years [23]. This distribution of participants’ ages is similar to what was found in this study.

3.4. Racial/ethnic Mix of Residents of Adjacent Counties

One issue that must also be considered in the context of the ethnic mix of visitors is the make-up of the population near the surveyed sites. A study conducted in the United Kingdom found that differences reflected in the use of outdoor recreation sites could, in some cases, be the result of the ethnic mix of the localized population [24]. In addition to site usage, the study compared the diversity of survey takers to the diversity of the people surrounding the study sites [24]. The data indicate that there are minorities resident within a 48.3 km (30 miles) radius of the BNF/SWA. Thus, the ethnic mix of the population in the counties adjacent to the BNF/SWA could not be attributed as the primary factor responsible for the minimal usage of this area by minorities. The BNF/SWA extends across Lawrence, Winston, and Franklin counties in northwestern Alabama. Marion, Morgan, Cullman, and Walker counties are adjacent to these three counties (Figure 1).

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the most significant minority populations existed in Lawrence County, with 11% of the population being African American and 5.7% being American Indian/Native American. Walker, Cullman, Marion, and Morgan counties had relatively low minority populations ([25]; Table 4). African Americans, Asians, American Indians/Native Americans, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders combined represented 6.5%, 2.0%, 4.1%, and 13.5% of Walker, Cullman, Marion, and Morgan counties' populations, respectively [25].

Table 4. Minority populations of Lawrence, Winston, Franklin, Walker, Cullman, Marion, and Morgan Counties according to the 2010 U.S. Census.

County	Total County Population	Race/Ethnicity	Percentage of Total Population (%)
Lawrence	34,339	African American	11.5
		Asian	0.1
		American Indian/Native American	5.7
		Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.02
Winston	24,484	African American	0.5
		Asian	0.2
		American Indian/Native American	0.7
		Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.1
Franklin	31,703	African American	3.9
		Asian	0.2
		American Indian/Native American	0.7
		Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.03
Walker	67,023	African American	5.8
		Asian	0.3
		American Indian/Native American	0.4
		Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.05
Cullman	80,406	African American	1.1
		Asian	0.4
		American Indian/Native American	0.5
		Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.02
Marion	30,776	African American	3.5
		Asian	0.2
		American Indian/Native American	0.3
		Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.05
Morgan	119,490	African American	11.9
		Asian	0.6
		American Indian/Native American	0.9
		Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.09

The transportation of potential visitors to BNF/SWA's outdoor recreation sites must also be addressed. Hispanic/Latino Americans and African Americans surveyed in an Oregon study preferred local areas that did not require traveling long distances and places not in remote locations [26]. These findings may be relevant in the context of the visitors to the BNF/SWA.

3.5. Visitor Use Patterns

Hiking (39.6%), camping (29.1%), picnicking (23.3%), and horseback riding (22.5%) are the most popular outdoor recreation activities pursued by visitors to the BNF/SWA (Table 5). A fair percentage (36.1%) of visitors to the BNF/SWA sites engaged in the leisurely activity of ‘relaxation,’ while 23.9% of visitors reported having participated in ‘other nonspecified’ outdoor recreation/leisure activities.

Table 5. The Mix of Leisure and Outdoor Recreation Activities Visitors to the BNF/SWA Participated in.

Outdoor Recreation/Leisure Activities	Level of Participation		Dominant Age Groups	
	# of Participants	% Total	Age Group(s)	# (%) of Total
Camping	66	21.9	40–49	19 (18.4)
Canoeing	14	6.2	50–59	4 (1.8)
			20–29	4 (1.8)
Swimming	41	18.1	20–29	9 (4.0)
Hunting	14	6.2	40–49	9 (4.0)
Hiking	90	39.6	30–39	22 (9.7)
Relaxation	82	36.1	50–59	18 (7.9)
Kayaking	10	4.4	50–59	5 (2.2)
Picnicking	53	23.3	30–39	17 (7.5)
Fishing	33	14.5	40–49	10 (4.4)
Sight Seeing	60	26.4	30–39	19 (8.4)
Birding	8	3.5	40–49	3 (1.3)
Horseback Riding	51	22.5	50–59	17 (7.5)
			20–29	4 (1.8)
Backpacking	18	7.9	30–39	4 (1.8)
			40–49	4 (1.8)
Other Activities	54	23.9	50–59	15 (6.6)

Participants in the 30–39 age group were the most active among hikers, picnickers, and backpackers, whereas participants in the 50–59 age group were primarily engaged in horseback riding, kayaking, and canoeing activities. The 40–49 age group dominated the camping, hunting, birding, and backpacking participants. The youngest visitors (20–29 age group) were most active in canoeing and swimming. This age group was also well represented among backpackers. Visitors in the 50–59 age group participated in relaxation more than any other age group (Table 5).

3.6. The Need to Promote More Diversity of Participants and Users of the BNF/SWA

The BNF/SWA is the only tract of national forest lands in North Alabama. The data and analyses revealed that minority participation in outdoor recreation and leisure pursuits at the BNF/SWA is extremely low compared to Caucasians (Tables 1 and 2). Furthermore, minority participation is not proportionate to the percentage of minorities represented in the sub-region’s total population. Against this background, the management of BNF/SWA may therefore wish to consider and explore strategies to address the lack of use of these federally managed public lands by minority ethnic groups. The implementation of a study aimed at identifying the constraints that negatively impact the use of the BNF/SWA by minorities and their participation in available outdoor recreation opportunities may be a critical step in this process.

4. Conclusions

Managers of outdoor recreation areas near known ethnically diverse populations should endeavor to be aware of, and sensitive to, the different cultures in the region impacted by these recreational areas, and adopt specific measures to encourage and facilitate the use of these areas by all ethnic and racial groups [27]. Ultimately, it will be necessary to address the particular concerns of minority groups, if equitable access and use of outdoor recreation opportunities are to be successfully realized. The ‘Piedmont Crescent’ defined as the corridor from north-central North Carolina to Birmingham, Alabama, which includes the BNF/SWA, has been identified as a “hot spot” [9] and further solidifies the need for further study in this area. Hot spots, in this context, are counties where heavy recreation pressures on forest resources or aquatic systems are anticipated [9].

Understanding the BNF/SWA’s visitor use patterns and demographics is critical for effective, long-term management of the anticipated outdoor recreation pressures in the “hot spot”. This study, likely to be extended in the future to include other parts of Alabama and the southeastern United States, has identified the characteristics and use patterns of BNF/SWA visitors. Persons of color are poorly represented among BNF/SWA’s visitors. However, one of the essential next steps will be to undertake a study to identify the constraints that are limiting the participation of minorities in outdoor recreation at the Bankhead National Forest/Sipsey Wilderness Area.

The rapid demographic changes being experienced in the USA and other developed countries are exposing several implications for resource managers in the provision of outdoor recreation services and opportunities to the many ethnic and racial groups [28,29]. This study, though focused on the state of Alabama, does have relevance for natural resource managers and outdoor recreation service providers on public lands in other parts of the USA and the world. For example, public land managers whose potential visitor pool is culturally diverse should appreciate the need for maintaining or increasing the level of social justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion among outdoor recreation participants. As Winter et al. [29] stated, equitable access to outdoor recreation makes a range of contributions to a sustainable future. However, the realization of ‘a true globally sustainable future’ for outdoor recreation will necessitate the active engagement and participation of all ethnic and racial groups at the community, state, national, and international levels. This is particularly important, considering the socioeconomic impacts and the significance of international tourism and outdoor recreation, to both developed and developing countries.

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