Sierra hikers dispute federal report about declining use of U.S. forests

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You can find Deb Devine running or riding her mountain bike on trails from Lake Tahoe to Galena just about every day, weather permitting.

It's what the Incline Village woman loves to do, and she regularly encounters many others -- young and old alike -- who share her outdoor passion.

That's why Devine was surprised to learn about a new government report suggesting fewer people are using national forest land these days.

"I talk to people who are hiking and using the trails all the time," said Devine, 46. "That does surprise me."

The visitor use national summary report, recently released by the U.S. Forest Service, shows that visits to the country's national forests declined from 204.8 million in 2004 to 178.6 million in 2007, a drop of about 13 percent and a continuation of a trend first noticed several years ago.

In the Forest Service's Region 4, which includes Nevada, Utah and southern Idaho, the report showed a 9 percent decline.

Visitors to Nevada's Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, which at 6.3 million acres is the largest national forest in the lower 48 states, also apparently dropped, said Forest Supervisor Ed Monnig.

In 2004, an estimated 2.9 million people visited the forest but the number dropped to 1.9 million in 2007, a decrease of nearly 35 percent.

The government's methods of gauging visitation have varied since efforts commenced in 2000 and the task is a difficult one, Monnig said.

"We don't have turnstiles; we don't take tickets," Monnig said. "It's a challenge to determine how many people really use the national forest."

Other officials also have doubts. Counts at California's Tahoe National Forest suggested a drop of about 2 million visitors between 2001 and 2005. Forest Service officials said much of that perceived drop was associated with how visits to ski resorts on Forest Service-leased land were tallied.

The number of mountain bikers in Tahoe National Forest appears on the rise, and officials suspect overall use might be as well.

"Our gut feeling is we're not seeing a downward trend," said Fran Herbst, acting recreation officer at the forest. "When we talk to the people on the ground, they are not experiencing an overall decline in
use. Their gut feeling is they're not seeing a decrease but perhaps a slight increase."

Jim Wessman of Washoe Valley hiked Friday morning up Mount Rose, as he does "a hundred times a year."

He sees a lot of people on the trail, often the same ones. But Wessman, 58, said that in recent years, he seems to have noticed more women using the backcountry.

Aaron Freed-Thall and friend Lexi Pillat, both of Truckee, also recently hiked up a portion of the Mount Rose trail.

Freed-Thall, 25, likes the trails to himself, so in that respect, he said diminishing use could have some benefits.

But Freed-Thall also worries that decreased use of forests could result in reduced funding by the government, which could in turn harm efforts to preserve precious forests.

Pillat, 23, said she would be surprised at any reduced use of national forests, particularly "because it's free."

But not everything is free, and that's one issue critics of the Forest Service are quick to pounce upon.

Increasingly common fees charged to forest visitors are cited as one reason visits might be declining, said Kitty Benzar, president of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition.

Since 2004, permanent fee programs were put in place across many public lands managed by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. Since then, existing fees were raised at more than 700 recreation sites and imposed at 200 new ones, the groups said.

Benzar said the practice could come with serious consequences.

"Fees were already driving many families away from public lands, even while times were good," Benzar said. "The economic crisis we're facing now will exacerbate a very worrisome trend. As household budgets are cut to the bare bones, visiting a National Forest will be just another luxury item that can be done without."

Monnig isn't convinced fees have had a serious impact, at least at Humboldt-Toiyabe.

Money collected at campgrounds in the forest increased from $714,200 in 2004 to $885,900 in 2008, but there were "relatively little" increases in camping fees charged over the period, Monnig said.

"We have seen, we think, an increase in campground use," Monnig said. "That's probably not surprising, given the increase of the population of Nevada."

However difficult visitation numbers may be to pin down, some decrease in use nationally does seem to be occurring, and that has caught the attention not only of public land managers, but of the outdoor industry that sells products to campers, hikers and backpackers, Monnig said.

That's resulted in a careful scrutiny of trends. Studies conducted by the National Park Service suggest a declining use of campgrounds since the early 1990s, while use of lodges in national parks is on the rise, according to the National Park Service Public Use Statistics office.

Fewer people also seem to be backpacking in the most remote areas of public land, Monnig said.
Fewer backpackers and more folks preferring to sleep under a roof than in a tent could simply reflect an aging population, Monnig said.

Another concern: More of America's young people could be more interested in playing computer games than experiencing the outdoors, a "disconnect from nature" Forest Service officials say could have long-term implications for not only the well-being of children but future stewardship of public land.

That concern helped prompt Forest Service Chief Gail Kimbell to pursue a new "Kids in the Woods" initiative to better connect youths to nature, Monnig said.

The issue is fostering plenty of debate, he said.

"There are some shifts in use patterns. There does seem to be a changing set of interests by the American people," Monnig said. "Obviously, we're in service to the American people, and if the American people don't like what we offer, it's going to affect what we do."

**Additional Facts**

**National Forest visits**

- 2004: 204.8 million.
- 2007: 178.6 million.
- Wilderness area visits in 2007: 6.3 million.
- Male visitors in 2007: 66.9 percent.
- Female visitors in 2007: 33.1 percent.

**Ages of visitors**

Younger than 16: 18.9 percent.
16 to 19: 3 percent.
20 to 29: 12.7 percent.
30 to 39: 16.4 percent.
40 to 49: 20 percent.
50 to 59: 16 percent.
60 to 69: 9.4 percent.
70 and older: 3.5 percent.

Source: U.S. Forest Service