These findings are not surprising and yet another sad reminder that today's gadget-minded kids and even their parents are spending less time tuning in to nature: The U.S. Forest Service recently issued a report stating that visits to national forests have dropped sharply -- from 204.8 million in 2001 to 178.6 million in 2007, a 16.6% decline.

Some areas are worse than others. In the Pacific Northwest, visitation is down by nearly 30%, but in California it's down only 7%.

Indeed, California has its bright spots, one of them being the Inyo National Forest, which includes such breathtaking parcels as the Ansel Adams Wilderness and John Muir Wilderness (and its towering centerpiece, Mt. Whitney).

The Inyo Register, quoting an Inyo National Forest officer and using anecdotal evidence from retailers, reports that preliminary findings indicate an increase in visitation.

The INF's Jeff Marsolais told the newspaper that visitor sampling was done in 2002 and 2005 and a draft of these findings was produced in July 2007. Data are still being refined but point to an upward trend expected to continue for the next several years.
As for the rest of the country, who knows what’s going through people’s minds. Outdoor recreation is, compared with most sporting events and other types of vacationing, a great value. It helps keep the fat off children and provides them with an understanding and, hopefully, an appreciation of the natural world.

That's healthier for them and essential for the future health of our national forests.

-- Pete Thomas

*Photo: Snowmobilers negotiate an Inyo National Forest trail near Mammoth Lakes. Credit: Pete Thomas / Los Angeles Times*