

# Exploring Outdoor Recreation in Western North Carolina

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**R**ecreation and the great outdoors are a combination made in heaven and brought to Earth in western North Carolina (WNC). Estimates are that travel and tourism in the region will grow from the 1987 level of 8.0 percent of the region's total employment to 9.7 percent by 1995<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the North Carolina Division of Travel and Tourism calculated that tourism spending in WNC was \$862.6 million in 1991<sup>2</sup>. With hundreds-of-thousands of acres of public and private recreational lands available, outdoor recreation<sup>3</sup> is a significant component of this mountainous region's economy.

A recent study conducted by the Mountain Outdoor Recreation Alliance (MORA) shows that, in general, outdoor recreationalists using private lands in western North Carolina seek conveniently located destinations of natural beauty that also maintain a sense of 'getting away from it all.' Most outdoor recreationalists are visitors to the mountain region, either travelling together as a single family or as a group of unrelated friends, with the vast majority coming from states in the Southeast--North Carolina, Florida, South Carolina and Georgia. The most commonly identified factors which drew these visitors and keep them coming back are the scenic beauty and natural features in the region, the condition of recreational facilities and the helpfulness of employees. Given the importance of travel and tourism to the economy of WNC, it is essential to support outdoor recreation by maintaining the natural splendor of the region, preventing overuse and overcrowding of facilities, and improving travel to and within the region.

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## The MORA Study

MORA was formed as the first regional organization in western North Carolina dedicated to promoting a partnership between and among the private and public providers of outdoor recreation. Officially organized in 1987 as the result of work by an outdoor recreation task force organized by Western North Carolina Tomorrow, MORA was also designed to generate and distribute information and advocate the protection of the natural resources vital to outdoor recreation in WNC.

Although successful in enrolling individuals and organizations, MORA realized that useful information about outdoor recreational providers and participants, particularly within the private sector, was scarce. Better understanding of the backgrounds, needs and preferences of the outdoor recreational participants would enable providers, planners, policy makers and others to more effectively serve the recreational consumer.

MORA asked the Raleigh-based North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center to fund a pilot survey-research project, the 1990-1991 Western North Carolina Mountain Outdoor Recreation Research Project. MORA then contributed its own funds and received additional funding and technical support from Western North Carolina Tomorrow, Western Carolina University's Center for Improving Mountain Living and School of Business, the United States Department of Agriculture's Forest Service [the Forest Service] and others.

The MORA study involved, among other things, research into selected private outdoor recreational activities in western North Carolina. The Forest Service's widely-used Public Area Recreation Visitors Study (PARVS) methodology and survey instruments were adapted, for the first time, for analysis of specific recreational activities in the private sector.

In this limited pilot study, MORA focused on camping, whitewater boating and golfing, just three components of the larger outdoor recreation market. The

Figure 1  
Visitor Residency Distribution

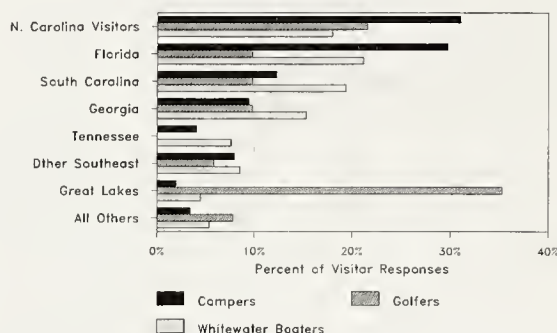
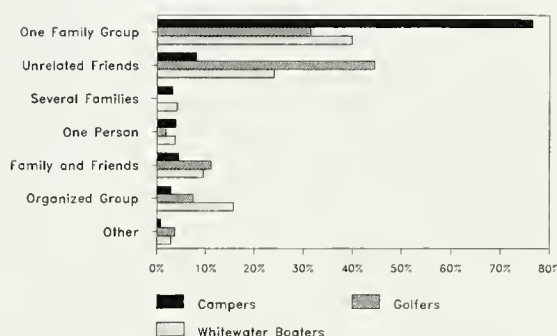


Figure 2  
Travel Group Description



MORA study randomly selected and interviewed nearly 1,000 campers, golfers and whitewater boaters during the summer and fall of 1990. Additional data were obtained from over 200 of these same study participants through a mailback survey. Analysis of the nearly 10,000 pages of survey data focused upon demographics, motivations, expenditures, activities, satisfactions, opinions and comments.

## Study Components

**Demographics.** Demographic analysis in the MORA study looked at the origin of visitors, the make-up of their groups and their education and income levels. The vast majority of campers and whitewater boaters surveyed were visitors to WNC, while slightly under one-half of the golfers did not have a place of residence in the region. In all, it was found that 79.6 percent of the campers, 43.6 percent of the golfers and 92.4 percent of the whitewater boaters were visitors to the region. Figure 1 presents a detailed residency distribution for visitors to western North Carolina. As shown in Figure 2, the most common type of travel group was the single family, followed by groups of unrelated friends traveling together. Camping was the most family-oriented of the

three activities, while golfers most frequently traveled with friends. The average size of the travel group was 4.8 people for campers, 7.6 for golfers and 7.4 for whitewater boaters.

As seen in Figure 3, whitewater boaters and golfers are significantly more educated than campers. Annual household income also varies by recreational activity. Campers had a mean annual household income of \$40,063, golfers, \$57,087, and whitewater boaters, \$49,755.<sup>4</sup>

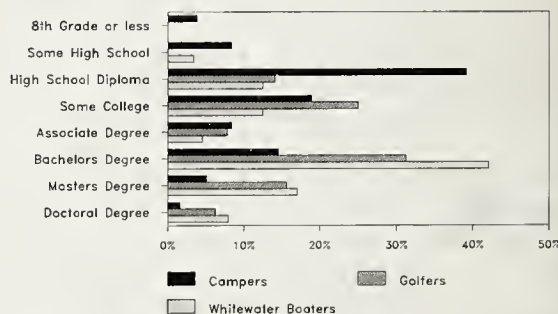
**Motivations.** Surveyed visitors traveled to WNC primarily for recreational purposes, choosing the region primarily because of its scenic beauty. (See figures 4 and 5.) 'Getting away from it all,' the convenience of the location, good facilities, repeat visits and 'just like the area' were secondary reasons for visiting WNC. Residents of WNC choose specific recreational sites for similar reasons as visitors, with scenic beauty and convenience of location as the two most common reasons.

**Expenditures.** Visitors to WNC spent, on an average daily basis, \$28.71 per person for campers, \$75.13 per person for golfers and \$56.85 per person for whitewater boaters. Regardless of activity, lodging is the largest expense, followed by food and beverage expenditures. (See figure 6.) In both cases, golfers spend more than either whitewater boaters or campers.

**Activities.** Figure 7 shows a breakdown of secondary activities of campers, golfers and boaters. Sightseeing, pleasure-walking and day-hiking were frequent activities for all three groups, as were picnicking and scenic photography. Campers, and to a lesser extent whitewater boaters, pursue many additional activities while golfers do little else but golf.

**Satisfaction statements.** Certain aspects of the recreational experience are crucial to the visitor's satisfaction. Regardless of activity, two issues are consistently important to visitors: the condition of the natural features and the helpfulness of facility employees. A third issue, the condition of the facilities, strongly affects the level of enjoyment for campers and whitewater boaters and moderately affects it for golfers. (See figure 8.)

Figure 3  
Distribution by Education Completed  
(Adults, 18 Years of Age and Older)





## Recommendations

The MORA study was designed and implemented as a pilot study; three of about 20 major outdoor recreational activities in WNC were examined. As such, the results of this study are tentative, due to a potential bias introduced by the limited survey period (the latter half of the season). Additional research is necessary to develop a comprehensive database on outdoor recreation in the region. Not only would this new research substantiate or refute the current findings, but it could also allow outdoor recreational providers and policy makers to more intelligently allocate scarce resources. Continued cooperation between individuals and organizations, both public and private, improves the region as a whole and enhances the experience of the outdoor recreational consumer. CP

*Editor's note: The User, Business, or Municipal and County Parks and Recreation Department Profile which resulted from the MORA study can be obtained from MORA, PO Box 1088, Cullowhee, NC, 28723. Cost of the reports vary and range from \$1.50 to \$4.00 per copy.*

Figure 4  
Purpose of Visit to WNC  
(Multiple Responses Allowed)

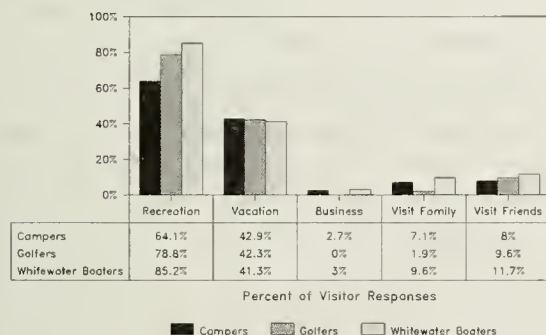
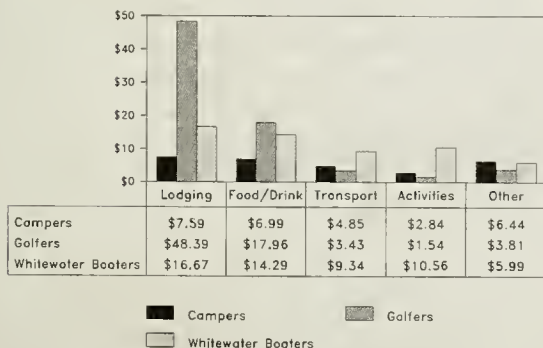


Figure 6  
Visitors' Daily per Person Expenditures



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>O'Conner, Frank, "Western North Carolina's Economy: The Role of Tourism and Travel", *Aspects of Economic Development*, Western Carolina University's Center for Improving Mountain Living, Cullowhee, NC, v.4, no.1, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, Paul, "Tourism Tooling Along", *Asheville Citizen-Times*, Oct. 26, 1992, Section B, pg. 1.

<sup>3</sup>Typical outdoor recreational activities range from passive items, such as sightseeing and visiting outdoor attractions to active participation in endeavors, such as hiking, camping, fishing, boating, golfing and skiing.

<sup>4</sup>These figures for mean annual household income are all substantially higher than the figures for median household income. Median incomes are \$37,500, \$47,500 and \$42,500 for campers, golfers and whitewater boaters, respectively. All three income distribution curves were skewed toward the higher income levels. The income distribution for campers was roughly uniform, while the curve for whitewater boaters was approximately normally distributed. For golfers, the curve had an inverted normal, or 'M' shape with observed values clustered near \$35,000 and \$65,000.

Figure 5  
Reasons for Choosing to Visit WNC  
(Multiple Responses Allowed)



Figure 7  
Activities Done or Planned This Visit  
(Multiple Responses Allowed)

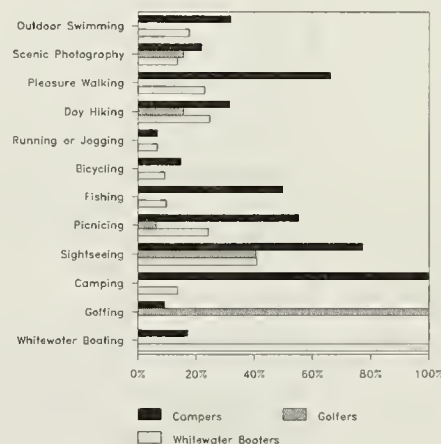


Figure 8  
Satisfaction Importance Ratings  
1=Low Importance 7=High Importance

