



The Neglected Hiker

by Robert C. Lucas and Robert P. Rinehart¹

AMERICA'S 10 MILLION HIKERS are being neglected. Fifteen years ago, Congress set up the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission to evaluate the needs of U.S. outdoorsmen. After what remains to this day the most exhaustive study of its kind, the commission reported, "It is something of a tribute to Americans that they do as much cycling and walking as they do, for very little has been done to encourage these activities, and a good bit, if inadvertently, to discourage them."

As far as the hiker is concerned, the situation reported by the commission has gone from bad to worse since the issuance of the report. While hikers have rapidly increased in numbers, trails have deteriorated or disappeared.

The United States has only about

100,000 miles of trails—less than one yard of trail per citizen. Give thanks that not everyone hikes and that all hikers do not hit the trail at the same time. If they did, they could all hold hands. There are approximately 50 yards of trail per square mile in our country, not including Alaska. (If Alaska were included, the average would be even lower.) England and Wales together have more miles of rural footpaths and bridlepaths than does the entire United States.

Most of the trails are in the West, the relics of past programs (mainly fire protection) rather than the product of recreation planning. This situation, recognized as early as 1952 in the annual report of the Chief of the U.S. Forest Service, has not changed. The 1968 National Trails System Act (P.L. 90-543) was passed to meet the need for recreational trails, but eight years later there are only a few active programs to build trails for recreation.

Trends are not encouraging. Total trail mileage in the United States is

probably declining—we say "probably" because comparable annual figures for all parts of the trail system (federal, state and local) are not available. Most of America's trail mileage is in the national forests, but trail mileage in national forests has dropped almost one-third from a peak in 1945. Roads have replaced many trails, and aerial fire-fighting techniques have led to abandonment of other trails. Pack strings of mules supplying fire fighters and manned lookouts, which used to depend on trail access, are now rarities. Airplanes, helicopters and trucks have almost relegated pack animals to the realm of nostalgia.

Urban sprawl, limited-access highways and large airports have eliminated many other hiking opportunities, especially on unofficial, unmaintained paths around cities and towns. This loss of trails has occurred at the same time the number of hikers and other trail users has been increasing rapidly.

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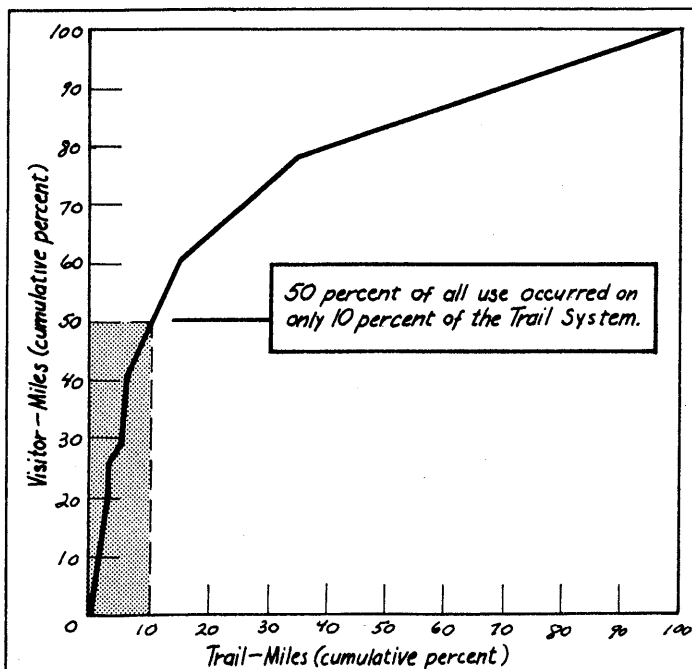
HIKING IS EASY TO NEGLECT. There are no long, conspicuous lines of people waiting their turn at the trailheads as there are at ski lifts. And hikers rarely buy admission tickets as campers and skiers do. Dispersal and lack of on-site payments hurt hiking in the competition for attention and public monies. Furthermore, hikers have not been as well represented by voluntary organizations as have many other types of recreationists. Although this situation may be starting to improve, hikers either tend to be absorbed in national

wilderness-oriented groups or involved in hiking clubs that promote a particular trail or region, such as the Appalachian Trail. In either case, there has been practically no national pressure for hiking opportunities outside official wilderness areas.

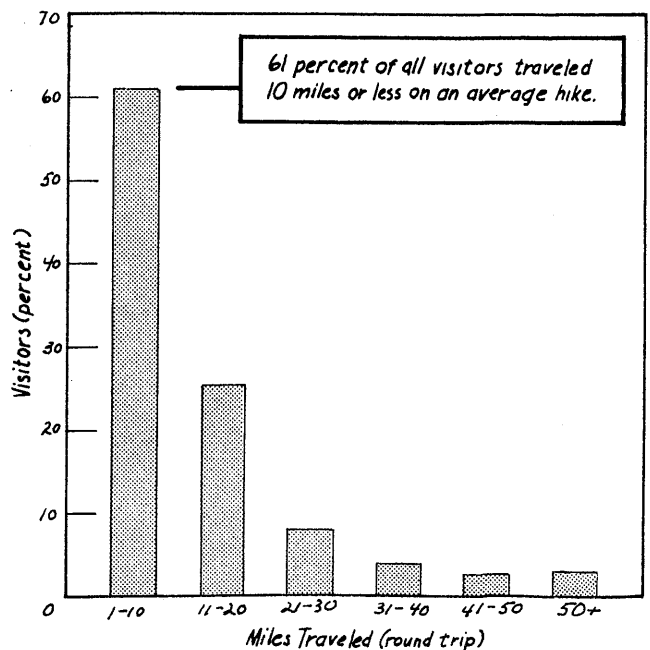
The neglect applies to research, also. There are only a handful of studies of trail users or trails, and almost all of them concern visitors to designated wilderness areas, rather than hikers, horsemen or ski-tourers in general. Of course, there is overlap;

some wilderness visitors are also hikers, but only a portion of the country's hikers visit designated wilderness areas.

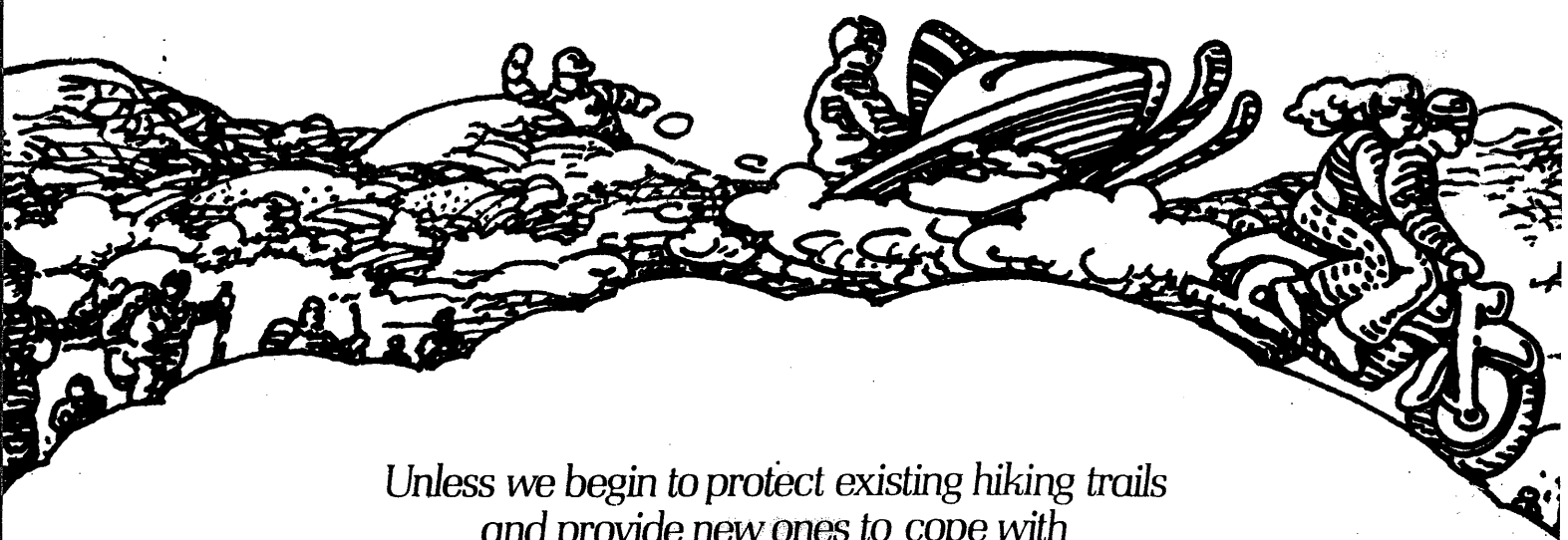
Approximately 10 million Americans who are 12 years of age or older are hikers, the criterion being that they walk with packs on their backs. That is about 7 percent of the population in the age group. Based on rough calculations from U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service use reports, we estimate that 10 to 15 percent of all hiking takes place in established wilderness within national forests or



Distribution of hikers on trail system, Spanish Peaks Primitive Area, Montana.



Distances traveled by hikers. (Based on 1970-71 survey of 2,264 visitors to eight wilderness and back-country areas in Montana and Idaho.)



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in national parks. Another 10 to 15 percent of all hiking takes place on national forest trails outside wilderness areas. This means that about two-thirds of all hiking is done on state, county and private lands.

About 50 percent of Americans walk for pleasure, which is defined by the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation (BOR) as walking without a pack. National surveys show that "nature walks" have twice as many participants as hiking. All told, a lot of people are out using their legs.

Hiking is not as grueling as some think. In recent studies conducted by our U.S. Forest Service wilderness research unit in eight areas in Montana and Idaho, more than half of all hikers questioned spent only one day on the trail, and fewer than one-tenth stayed more than two nights. In our studies, and in others, the typical hiker is on a one-day outing and has traveled no more than a few hours from home.

The same studies show that most wilderness hikes are less than 10 miles in length, round trip, and are concentrated on a few favorite trails. For example, we found that about half of all trail use in the Spanish Peaks Primitive Area near Bozeman, Montana, occurs on only one-tenth of the area's trail system. Use is even more concentrated in the Selway-Bitterroot and Bob Marshall wildernesses in Idaho and Montana. Concentrated use has been typical of every area studied in the United States and Canada. One likely reason is that most trails were not designed for recreation; it is only a lucky accident that a few of them

are attractive to hike. Another and probably more important reason could be lack of information about available trails. But to be honest, the reasons trail use varies so sharply are really not understood—hardly surprising, since it has been studied so little.

WHAT KINDS OF PEOPLE HIKE? Bureau of Outdoor Recreation surveys have shown that hikers are about evenly divided between males and females, and that women and girls outnumber men and boys in walking for pleasure, nature walks and bicycling (at least they did a few years ago). We have found, in the wildernesses we have studied, that men still outnumber women about three to one, although the proportion of women has risen in recent years.

Young people are most common in physically demanding activities. Participation gradually drops off as age increases. We found that 50 percent of all backpackers are under 30 years of age. This is not necessarily a reflection of ability declining with age. Part of the drop probably results from changing interests and desires. Furthermore, older people grew up in a society with fewer opportunities to develop interests in many types of outdoor recreation. (There are exceptions—more people used to live in rural areas where places to hunt and fish were easier to find.) Workweeks were longer; travel was less easy; efficient light packs and tents were not as common; and, most important, attitudes about leisure and its use were more restrictive. Perhaps the almost

traditional neglect of hikers is understandable: most politicians and land managers old enough to be in positions of authority in public agencies grew up in this same society. If they hiked and rode horses, it was usually work, not recreation.

What are future trends? Although only a few trails are presently being built and existing trails are not always being maintained, trail use is growing and seems sure to grow a lot more. Projections to 1980 by the BOR indicated that hiking will grow 78 percent over 1965 levels and that "walking for pleasure" will grow 49 percent. Based on past predictions, these estimates are probably too low. We just do not know enough about hikers to make reliable predictions, but we can support general predictions by citing recent growth of hiking and related activities. During a recent five-year period (1965 to 1970), when the population 12 years old and older grew eight percent, hiking increased 26 percent and walking for pleasure 57 percent—becoming the leading type of outdoor recreation in terms of numbers of occasions. (During the same period, horseback riding climbed 44 percent, and bicycling soared 92 percent.)

MORE AND MORE PEOPLE using fewer trails, and in new and different ways, have aggravated problems of overuse, of misuse and of conflicts between uses in wilderness areas and on backcountry trails. Use conflicts are particularly serious between man and machine—or really between men with and without ma-



chines. Outside wilderness, the hiker often must compete with four-wheel-drive vehicles and trail bikes in summer and snowmobiles in winter. But hikers so strongly dislike meeting machines that areas used by motorized vehicles become largely unsuitable for hikers. The conflict is one-sided; mechanized visitors rarely mind meeting hikers except when militant hikers lash out verbally or physically. (One ski tourer in the White Mountains of New Hampshire reportedly tried to skewer a snowmobiler with his ski pole.)

Machine noise, environmental damage and the less physical effort required—which to hikers does not seem like playing fair—all contribute to the antipathy. Hikers and drivers have deep differences in motivation for trail use, different desires and goals and different reactions to the same experiences. The hiker, in our studies and in others, is generally less activity-oriented (not as interested in fishing, for example), less concerned with reaching a specific destination, less desirous of developed facilities, more motivated by an interest in scenic beauty and more often seeking solitude than the mechanized visitor. This means that the sort of area the trail-bike rider really wants and would enjoy most is often different from that desired by the hiker. On the other hand, the skier and snowshoer may prefer pretty much the same sort of country as the snowmobiler, which leads to conflict.

The conflict is intensified by a lack of clear trail-planning objectives and by a scarcity of active trail pro-

grams. More separation of mechanized and nonmechanized trail uses is essential. Each type needs areas suited to it. Land managers must now recognize and plan for diversity and variety in trail systems—long and short, hard and easy, close and far—and for different kinds of users.

The greatest need at this time is for trails for one-day hikes, most of which must be close to major population centers. Here is where the demand is the greatest, and where opportunities are most limited. The present recreation needs of inner-city people can best be met by providing opportunities close to home because many of these citizens lack the mobility to use more distant areas. Trail needs in general are most acute in the Middle West and East, where hiking is popular despite very limited trail opportunities. Ingenuity is needed to find places for trails in areas where little public land is available. Abandoned railroad roadbeds, powerline rights-of-way and military reserves all have potential.

Because most hikes are shorter than 10 miles round trip, we must resist an overfascination with grandiose “national trails” that run for hundreds or even for thousands of miles. These trails have a monumental aura about them and are impressive on a map, and perhaps reports of “trophy treks” give the average hiker inspiration and vicarious enjoyment. But because very few hikes take place more than a half-day from home and most hikes are short, such trails are obviously not serving most hikers (although some parts of them are used

for short hikes). The long trails are a part of the picture but are not top priority now.

TRAIL SYSTEMS NEED and deserve more attention outside established wilderness. Wilderness has its own special role to play, as a natural ecosystem with opportunities for solitude and challenge, but it cannot and should not become almost the only place to hike. Nonwilderness “trail recreation areas” could fill a real void and provide a great deal of enjoyment for many people, at lower cost. At the same time, nonwilderness trails could divert some kinds of use and help free wilderness to serve the purpose for which it was established. They also could give people a chance to experience a wide variety of landscapes—low elevation, big-tree forests; river bottoms; prairies; hardwood forests—in addition to the alpine, high-elevation areas that characterize so much of the present wilderness system. Because of mountainous settings, most of the wilderness system has only a short, summer-use season. Trails in other types of locations could provide for more spring and fall hiking.

Hiking trails should be designed primarily for scenic enjoyment, as an opportunity for esthetic experiences. Seeking out views, vistas, enchanting little spots and environmental variety should prevail over engineering efficiency. The shortest distance between two points generally should not be followed. A good trail does not necessarily have to lead to a specific destination; trails can be an end in themselves, although the opposite idea has



been expressed. Most hiking trails can be fairly simple.

Incompatible trail uses need to be separated more. In many places, low-intensity horse- and hiker-use can be combined, but machines must be isolated if possible. This isolation complicates planning and raises costs, yet we think the benefits would justify the expense. The alternatives seem to be either the banning of all mechanized trail travel or allowing it to seriously impair the satisfactions of all other trail users.

Planning and building trails takes lots of time, money and labor—always scarce commodities. Some trail building might provide useful jobs during a period of high unemployment. Much of the present trail system was built in the depression of the 1930s. Although an economic slump should not be required to get trails built, a slump could be an opportunity for trail building.

Meanwhile, better information about trails could help hikers to make better use of existing trails, quickly and at modest cost. Would-be hikers are often frustrated by ignorance about where to go. Published trail guides have greatly changed use patterns, without really intending to and not to everybody's satisfaction. The information shortage is especially acute in large cities where there is little public land for hiking nearby. Much more could be done to help people find that which is available.

FINALLY, MORE RESEARCH is needed. The management programs for all trail users need in-

Percent of population 12 years old or over that participated in hiking, and miles of public trail relative to area and population, by U.S. Census regions

Census regions	Percent hiking ¹ (rank)	Miles of trail ² (rank)	Miles of trail of 100 square miles (rank)	Miles of trail per 100,000 people ³ (rank)
Northeast	8 (3)	1,957 (6)	2.9 (3)	17 (3)
Middle Atlantic	5 (5)	1,663 (7)	1.6 (4)	5 (8)
East North Central	8 (3)	2,306 (4)	.9 (6)	6 (7)
West North Central	6 (5)	785 (9)	.2 (9)	5 (8)
South Atlantic	3 (9)	4,263 (3)	1.5 (5)	14 (4)
East South Central	6 (5)	1,093 (8)	.6 (7)	9 (6)
West South Central	6 (5)	1,988 (5)	.5 (8)	11 (5)
Mountain	14 (1)	52,355 (1)	6.1 (1)	471 (1)
Pacific	10 (2)	32,027 (2)	3.5 (2)	117 (2)
Average, U.S.	7	98,437 (total)	2.7	48

¹From Survey of Outdoor Recreation, BOR 1965.

²From Trails for America, BOR 1966.

³Based on 1970 census population reports.

creased emphasis; but, even if funds and other resources were provided, the uncertainties discussed here would inevitably produce major mistakes and inefficiencies. Research could better identify fragile settings that trails should avoid and durable places where trails belong. This would produce more attractive trails and get more hiking opportunities from limited tax dollars. Much could be learned about what different trail users want in terms of design, length, level of difficulty and locations. Conflicts between different users need to be better understood to give everybody a fair shake. Unfortunately, the research effort to date has been too small and too scattered. The returns for the American people from good

research, which could be implemented in better planning and management, would exceed the costs many fold.

To the hiker, places to hike are as vital as wilderness to the grizzly bear or free-flowing streams to the Atlantic salmon. Yet, unless we begin to protect existing hiking trails and provide new ones to cope with projected demands, the hiker faces a grim future—more and more hikers with fewer and fewer places to hike. If the current neglect continues, perhaps one day a manikin complete with waffle stompers and pack will stand in our museums alongside the passenger pigeon, great auk and other extinct species. The American hiker will have passed into history. ■