

Fewer hikers means less support for conservation, study says

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Serious hikers and backpackers tend to become supporters of environmental and conservation groups while casual woodland tourists do not, a new study says -- and a recent fall-off in strenuous outdoor endeavors portends a coming decline in the ranks of conservation backers.

Oliver Pergams, visiting research assistant professor of biological sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Patricia Zaradic, director of the Red Rock Institute in Pennsylvania, made headlines in early 2008 with a study showing that a steady decline in nature recreation since the late 1980s correlated strongly with a rise in playing video games, surfing the Internet and watching movies -- an unhealthy trend they called "videophilia."

Now Pergams and Zaradic, along with Peter Kareiva, chief scientist at the Nature Conservancy, have found that only people who engage in vigorous outdoor sports, like hiking and backpacking, tend later to become supporters of mainline [conservation](#) groups, while those who only go sightseeing or fishing do not. Their findings are reported Oct. 7 in [PLoS ONE](#), an online publication of the Public Library of Science.

The researchers found that the amount of time one spent hiking or backpacking in nature correlated with a willingness, 11 to 12 years later, to financially support any of four representative conservation organizations: the Nature Conservancy, World Wildlife Fund, the Sierra Club or Environmental Defense. The typical backpacker gave \$200 to

\$300 per year, after the dozen-year lag.

"For the first time, we've shown a direct correlation between outdoor recreation and investment in conservation, and we know what types of outdoor activity are most likely to lead to conservation investment," Zaradic said.

Surprisingly, the more time one spent fishing or sightseeing in natural areas, the less likely that person was to support these particular conservation causes.

"Apparently not all outdoor recreation is equal in terms of who is going to be an investor in conservation," Zaradic said.

The researchers conclude that there are effectively "two Americas" when it comes to nature exposure and support for conservation. Environmental groups depend on a very narrow base of support from elite, active outdoor enthusiasts -- a group that is predominantly white, college-educated, higher income, and over 35.

"There's a much broader market -- more diverse and urban -- that can be tapped by conservation organizations," Zaradic said. "Those groups haven't been spoken to in a way that attracts them."

Pergams agrees the finding is a wake-up call to environmental groups that their base is shrinking, as giving can be predicted to fall during the next decade with the decline in hiking and backpacking since their popularity peaked from 1998 to 2000.

Also boding ill for the conservation groups is an economic study Pergams published in 2004 that showed that support for conservation depends on the broader economy and can be predicted by GDP and personal income. Pergams is concerned that the current economic crisis

will add to the conservationists' woes caused by declines in hiking over the past dozen years.

"It's a 'perfect storm' of lower personal and corporate income resulting in less conservation support, compounded by effects from the past decline in hiking and backpacking," he said. "It's tough times ahead."

Pergams says the key to conservation awareness and support is to reach children early with broad-based educational programs that introduce them to vigorous outdoor recreation.

"If you never get out into nature, you're not going to care about it when you get older," Pergams said. "The kids are where it's at, and we're losing our kids to other influences -- they don't go outside."

Source: University of Illinois at Chicago ([news](#) : [web](#))

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