

# Study reveals that nation's national forests can provide public health benefits

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Each year, more than 170 million people visit national forests for recreation. And the physical activity associated with these visits burns 290 billion food calories. That equals enough french fries laid end to end to reach the Moon and back -- twice -- according to a recent study in the *Journal of Forestry*.

While the recent strategic plan of the U.S. Forest Service includes sustaining and enhancing outdoor recreation opportunities, the benefits of exercise and outdoor recreation also are recognized by President Obama's America's Great Outdoors initiative to reconnect Americans with their landscapes, as well as the First Lady's Let's Move Outside campaign.

But how exactly do our national forests contribute to helping people develop a healthier lifestyle? A recently published study may reveal some answers.

"We examined the extent that national forests might provide public health benefits by estimating the net energy expended for a range of outdoor activities engaged in by visitors to national forest lands," explains research forester Jeff Kline. "We did this by combining data describing national forest visitors' outdoor recreation activities with data characterizing the calories expended with each type of [physical activity](#)."

Kline, a scientist with the Forest Service's [Pacific Northwest Research Station](#), and Oregon State University co-authors, Randall Rosenberger

and Eric White, recently published their findings in the September issue of the *Journal of Forestry*. The article, "A National Assessment of Physical Activity in U.S. National Forests," contends that national forests can help Americans meet guidelines for [regular physical activity](#) set by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

Key findings from the study include:

- Hiking, walking, downhill skiing, fishing, relaxing, camping, relaxing, and driving for pleasure are among the primary activities accounting for about two-thirds (68 percent) of all visits to the national forests.
- Annual energy expenditures in national forest recreation represent 6.8 million adults and almost 317,000 children meeting the Centers of Disease Control and
- Prevention guidelines regarding regular aerobic physical activity for a year.

The distribution of these health benefits may vary with proximity and income. Fifty-two percent of recreation visits are by people who live within 60 miles of a national forest. These "local" visitors are more likely to come from lower household income groups than non-local visitors, with 45 percent earning less than \$50,000 per year versus 25 percent for non-local visitors.

National forests in the Western states account for the greatest share of all outdoor recreation visits (75 percent) and associated net energy expenditures (75 percent). However, national forests in the Northeast and Southeast yield proportionally greater net energy expenditures because they are closer to major population centers compared to the west, and their visitors tend to engage in more intensive physical activities.

Provided by USDA Forest Service

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