

Recreational activities on private land help landowners and conservation

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Credit: Luke Macaulay

Successfully integrating human activities with ecosystem conservation forms the foundation of sustainability and is key to maintaining biological diversity. A new study has found that recreational use of private land in the U.S. could have significant benefits for both

conservation efforts and economic return, especially when coupled with certain policy mechanisms.

The study, published Friday in the journal *Land Use Policy*, found that approximately 440 million acres of private land—roughly 22% of the contiguous land area of the U.S.—are either leased or owned for wildlife-associated recreation, which is defined as fishing, hunting and wildlife-watching. Hunting was the most widespread recreational use, accounting for 81% of the total acreage (356 million [acres](#)).

Luke Macaulay, an Assistant Cooperative Extension Specialist in the department of Environmental Science, Policy, and Management at UC Berkeley, authored the study, which used eighteen national surveys over fourteen years for a comprehensive analysis. Drawing upon multiple years and multiple sources of surveys, this study provides the most detailed and precise estimates available of private land recreation in the U.S.

The study estimated the annual spending for wildlife-associated recreation on private land to be \$814 million in day-use fees, \$1.48 billion for long-term leases, and \$14.8 billion for ownership of land primarily for recreation.

It also found that on crop and grazing land, landowners who earn income from recreation are more likely to participate in government conservation programs and are more likely to pay for private [conservation practices](#), such as creating buffers around sensitive streams or controlling invasive weeds on rangelands.

Macaulay suggests that this data provides support for the idea that recreation incentivizes conservation at higher rates than agricultural activities alone: "Wildlife habitat on private land is vulnerable to degradation and loss, but this study highlights recreation as an incentive

for conservation. That's because many landowners are receiving either personal enjoyment or financial benefit from the wildlife that live on their land."

The study showed that hunters own or lease much larger properties than anglers or wildlife-watchers, which indicates that hunting may provide a greater economic incentive for maintaining large unfragmented properties that provide a variety of conservation benefits. Macaulay explained, "Large properties are beneficial for a variety of reasons; for example, some species require large expanses of unbroken habitat to thrive, while others are particularly sensitive to the impacts of roads, fences, and invasive plant and animal species that oftentimes accompany more fragmented landscapes."

Macaulay believes that the role of recreation in private land conservation has largely been overlooked due to the relatively low participation rate of landowners earning income from recreation. For example, only 7.3% of forest landowners earn income from recreation, but this study found that those individuals own much larger properties that account for 33.5% of all private forestland.

Macaulay stressed that the conservation benefits of hunting depended on a system of scientifically-developed game laws and effective enforcement, which is generally the case across the U.S. These mechanisms are important to curtail problems of over-harvesting and poaching.

The study also emphasized the importance of encouraging conservation practices in conjunction with recreation in order to yield benefits for both conservation and landowner economic return. Macaulay suggested several policy measures to achieve this, including tying habitat improvement practices to property tax breaks that rural landowners receive—an approach that some states have already taken—as well as

evaluating, enhancing, and expanding state programs that give regulatory flexibility for hunting in exchange for conservation practices.

More information: Luke Macaulay. The role of wildlife-associated recreation in private land use and conservation: Providing the missing baseline, *Land Use Policy* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.landusepol.2016.06.024](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2016.06.024)

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