Who’s out there? Assessing visitation on the Florida National Scenic Trail

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The University of Florida’s School of Forest Resources and Conservation (SFRC) finished its seventh year of assessing visitor use for the Florida National Scenic Trail (FNST) – a project funded by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), National Forests in Florida. The FNST is an approximately 1400 mile trail that winds from Pensacola to Big Cypress National Preserve. Every citizen in Florida lives no more than two hours from the trail, and it crosses through almost every state and federal land management agency (including Department of Defense lands), as well as, a variety of private and municipal lands.

The purpose of the study is to determine reliable use estimates of annual trail visits to 27 segments of the FNST and to provide socio-demographic profiles of those visitors. This combination of visitor numbers with socio-demographic information not only provides holistic information to manage FNST visitation, but it also assists the US Forest Service and the newly established FNST Coalition as they develop a strategic plan for the Trail.

The most common method for collecting visitor counts has been through the use of mechanical counters (Diamond Traffics TCC-4420 and TrailMaster 1550 infrared eye counters). UF surveyors collect socio-demographic data by sampling visitors at trailheads along the length of the trail and conducting on-site visitor questionnaires.

For the 2009-2010 study year, the FNST received an estimated 352,218 visits of which 51.9% were estimated to be pedestrian visits and 48.1% were estimated to be other visits (e.g., biking and horseback riding). Lake Okeechobee received the most use due to its large section of trail and close proximity to cities. The Cross Florida Greenway, Gulf Islands National Seashore, and Little Big Econ State Forest also host large number of visitors. Results of the visitor survey over the last seven years show that 50% of respondents live within 30 miles of the FNST, 60% are repeat visitors to the FNST, 47% spend one hour or less on the trail, and almost half (49%) travel with one other person. Most visitors are generally happy with their experience on the FNST with over 80% saying that it was a “nearly perfect” to “perfect” experience.
Recent Research

Realizing the Potential of Ecosystem Services: A Framework for Relating Ecological Changes to Economic Benefits

Increasingly government agencies are seeking to quantify the outcomes of proposed policy options in terms of ecosystem service benefits, yet conflicting definitions and ad hoc approaches to measuring ecosystem services have created confusion regarding how to rigorously link ecological change to changes in human wellbeing. Here, we describe a step-by-step framework for producing ecological models and metrics that can effectively serve an economic-benefits assessment of a proposed change in policy or management. A focus of the framework is developing comparable units of ecosystem goods and services to support decision-making, even if outcomes cannot be monetized. Because the challenges to translating ecological changes to outcomes appropriate for economic analyses are many, we discuss examples that demonstrate practical methods and approaches to overcoming data limitations. The numerous difficult decisions that government agencies must make to fairly use and allocate natural resources provides ample opportunity for interdisciplinary teams of natural and social scientists to improve methods for quantifying changes in ecosystem services and their effects on human well-being. This framework is offered with the intent of promoting the success of such teams as they support managers in evaluating the equivalency of ecosystem service offsets and trades, establishing restoration and preservation priorities, and more generally, in developing environmental policy that effectively balances multiple perspectives.

To read the full article members click here.

Upcoming Events

- Florida Forestry Association Annual Meeting, September 7-8, 2011 St. Augustine, FL. To register, please complete the registration form at http://www.floridaforest.org/events.php?event_id=153 and send payment to Debbie Bryant, Florida Forestry Association, P.O. Box 1696, Tallahassee Florida, 32302; debbie@forestfla.org

- CFEOR Workshop: Landscape-scale mechanical fuels reduction treatments effects on fire behavior, fuel loads, and forest ecology, September, 2011 at the Osceola National Forest in Olustee, FL. Stay tuned for final date. To learn more go to http://www.sfrc.ufl.edu/CFEOR/UpcomingEvents.html

- Southeast Herbicide Applicator Conference, October 3-5, 2011 at the Edgewater Beach Resort, Panama City Beach, FL. See website for details: http://www.conference.ifas.ufl.edu/sehac/, or contact Johanna Gilbert, Conference Coordinator, UF-IFAS, Office of Conferences & Institutes, (352) 392-5930, jhanna@ufl.edu

- 2nd Annual Shortleaf Pine Conference, September 20-22, 2011 Huntsville, Alabama. Conference will include speakers, field trips, and discussion related to Shortleaf pine management for timber and wildlife habitat needs. Details will follow.

- Ninth Symposium on Fire and Forest Meteorology, October 18-20, 2011 in Palm Springs, CA. To learn more go to http://www.ametsoc.org/meet/fainst/20119fireforest.html
Upcoming Events

- Florida Society of American Foresters and UF School of Forest Resources Symposium, November 8-9, 2011 in Gainesville FL. For more information contact Dr. Pat Minoge at pminogue@ufl.edu or (850)875-7142.

- Mark your calendars!– Natural Areas Conference on November 1-4, 2011. An exceptional conference experience! Located in the Florida Panhandle, the unique landscapes will provide an exciting conference setting and diverse field trip opportunities. The Florida State University Conference Center offers a state-of-the-art venue to share research through numerous technical symposia as well as thought-provoking invited and contributed plenary and paper sessions on stewardship, management and research. The extensive program also features special sessions including an all-day Cogengrass workshop and State and Federal Natural Area Roundtables; our co-host NAEPPC will feature dedicated tracks for sharpening invasive species management. View the call for papers at http://www.naturalarea.org/NaturalAreasConferenceAnnouncement.asp


CFEOR Mission:
To develop and disseminate knowledge needed to conserve and manage Florida's forest as a healthy, working ecosystem that provides social, ecological and economic benefits on a...