

# Oregon's Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP)

## Encouraging Youth Outdoor Recreation Participation in Oregon

### Summary Report

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## SUMMARY REPORT

In preparation for the 2008-2012 Oregon Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department (OPRD) contracted Oregon State University (OSU) to conduct a survey of Oregon youth and their parents. This research was motivated by a concern that youth involvement in outdoor recreation has been decreasing, which may reduce the physical and mental health benefits of recreation, as well as future support for outdoor recreation and the natural areas where it occurs.

Survey recipients were obtained from commercially provided lists of “child intense” households in Oregon. Each person in the sample received a parent survey and two youth surveys. Parents reported on their own outdoor recreation behavior and that of a randomly selected child between the ages of 3 and 17 (if there were any in the household). The youth surveys were intended for household youth, up to a maximum of two, in the 12 to 17 age range. Several youth surveys were completed by youth younger than 12, and these responses were included in the report despite being outside the target range.

Surveys were mailed to a total of 3,712 recipients. Adjusting for undeliverables, the response rate was 18%. In total, 637 parent surveys were received, of which 365 included data on a child. In total, 354 youth surveys were received. Census data on location (by county), gender, and household income were used to weight responses and reduce the potential for non-response bias. In addition, a brief phone survey of non-respondents was used to assess potential non-response bias. All survey research is subject to error, and this survey relies in part on parental evaluations of their child’s behavior and of their own experiences as children. Nonetheless, significant attention has been given to minimizing potential error and bias. To our knowledge, this is the highest quality and most comprehensive data currently available on youth outdoor recreation in Oregon – and better data than is commonly available in other states.

Starting with the parent survey, the most popular (highest average days in past year) outdoor activities for parents is walking, viewing natural features, and relaxing/hanging out. For children, the most popular is walking, followed by outdoor sports/games, relaxing/hanging out, and general play at neighborhood parks/playgrounds. There are significant and generally strong correlations between parental participation and child participation – the more a parent engages in an activity, the more a child does.

Participation varies across child age, with both the number of activities and the number of activity days peaking amongst 12-14 year olds and decreasing for 15-17 year olds. Boys tend to have higher participation rates overall and amongst the most popular activities, but most differences generally are not statistically significant. Differences across location generally are significant, with rural children spending more days, on average, in outdoor activities relative to urban and suburban children. With respect to parental education and household income, participation generally increases from the lowest level to the “middle levels” and then decreases again at higher levels. For example, number of activity days is highest for children of parents with a high school diploma and in households with annual income of \$25,000 to \$35,000.

For most activities, parents first engaged in the activity as a child, rather than as an adult. This is consistent with research indicating the importance of early life participation setting a pattern for later life participation. When asked who introduced their child to each activity, parents individually or collectively was by far the most common response. There were also patterns

across activities, with fathers being more common than mothers as “introducers” of hunting, for example, and mothers being more common than fathers for horseback riding.

Relative to five years ago, parents were somewhat more likely to currently spend less time than more time in outdoor recreation. Work commitments was the main reason for those spending less time, while children getting older was the main reason for those spending more time. Parents in suburban and rural households were largely unchanged, on average, in the time spent in outdoor recreation, whereas urban parents spent less time than five years ago.

Parents reported how much time, in broad categories, their children spend in each of several activities. Time spent varied across age. Relative to older children, younger children tended to spend more time in Play at school and Play not at school. Allocation of time across activities became more homogenous with age, as older children spent less time in the above activities and more time in indoor sports, outdoor sports, and outdoor chores. Differences across gender and location were greatest for Play not at school – boys and rural children spend more time than girls and urban/suburban children in this activity. With respect to parental education and household income, time spent in most activities decreased as levels increased. For example, time engaged in Play at school decreased as parental education level increased.

An important issue is how much time the current generation of children spends engaged in outdoor activities relative to the time their parents spent as children. Based on parental reports, children spend more time, on average, than parents did in organized sports, both indoor and outdoor. However, there have been decreases in other activities, with the greatest decreases occurring in Outdoor chores and Outdoor play not at school. This is consistent with other literature indicating an increase in structured/organized activities and a decrease in unstructured activities. These decreases have been greater for girls than boys (though the difference is significant only for Outdoor chores). The effect by location has been mixed, though the greatest decrease has been in Outdoor chores amongst children in urban and suburban areas. Results suggest that a tradeoff exists between homework and time spent in outdoor activities.

Most parents report that their children engage in 30 minutes of moderate exercise on average per day, and this exercise is most likely to occur outdoors. Boys are more likely than girls to engage in this level of exercise. There are also differences across parental education and household income, though not in a consistent pattern.

With respect to 16 outdoor skills, parents rated the importance of each skill, their child’s ability, and their child’s ability relative to their own ability as a child. With the exception of swimming and applying environmental ethics, children were rated, on average, as having a lower ability than their parents when they were children. Safety-oriented skills were rated as most important, with swimming receiving the highest importance rating, followed by first aid skills and map/compass skills. Though average importance rating across all skills varied only modestly across locations (rural, suburban, urban), there were differences for individual skills. For example, building a fire was rated as more important by rural parents than by urban or suburban parents.

Child ability levels varied by age, as one would expect, with older children having higher skill levels. Change across age levels was dramatic for skills such as swimming, with children 6 and older having much higher ability levels than children 3 to 5 years old. The change in skill levels across the generations (child’s ability relative to parent’s ability as child) varied across location for some skills. For example, the greatest decrease in tent pitching skills was for urban children.

The change also varied across income levels, with parents in households with \$35,000 to \$50,000 income reporting the greatest average decrease in skill levels across the generations.

Turning to programs designed to help children engage in outdoor recreation, outdoor sports programs was the most popular type of program with respect to both past and likely future participation. The preferred participation time for such programs was weekends and summer weekdays, and most parents indicated a willingness to participate in such programs with their child. When considering the constraints that limit participation, parents report that lack of information and cost are the two most important constraints. As expected, cost was noticeably more important for low income households than for high income households. Though less dramatic, the importance of constraints also varied by child age, child gender, and location.

Having fun was easily the most important priority for parents in selecting programs, though staying safe and physical activity were also important (note that “staying safe” may have been interpreted in various ways, from the program being safe to the program helping children avoid trouble associated with alternate activities). There were some differences in priorities across child age groups, with Provide parents time without their kids being most important for parent of young children and for parents in low income households. Academic enrichment was most important for parents of girls and for parents with middle levels of education (especially those with a high school diploma or some college).

Safety has been noted as a concern for parents, but responses to a set of safety and accessibility statements did not indicate a major safety concern for respondents overall. Most felt there are safe opportunities for their children to engage in outdoor activities. Perceptions of safety were most positive amongst suburban respondents and less positive amongst urban and rural respondents.

Turning to the youth survey, outdoor field games was clearly the favorite activity for youth. As expected, this varied by age, with going to parks / playgrounds being the favorite for young children and outdoor field games being the favorite for older children. The diversity of favorite activities generally increased with age. Though parents play critical roles in introducing youth to activities, friends and other family (e.g., siblings) are more popular recreation partners for youth. When asked what they would like to do more often, youth most commonly noted outdoor field games, followed by biking and camping. More or better facilities and more participants or teams would help youth engage more often. Homework and other (e.g., indoor) activities were noted as the most common constraint to youth spending more time outdoors.

Youth were asked to create an ideal activity program, selecting one or more from a list of 31 potential activities. Tent camping was the most popular activity to include in such a program, followed by sledding / tubing, swimming / diving, and outdoor field games. Activity preferences varied across age. For example, mountain biking was most popular for 6-11 year olds while ATV riding was most popular for 15-17 year olds. Preferences across gender often followed traditional gender participation patterns, but there was often shared enthusiasm. For example, both males and females included camping as a popular activity, though females were equally enthusiastic about cabin and tent camping while males preferred tent camping. Youth preferred to do their favorite program activity with friends and in groups of 3-5 or 6-10 people.

This document is the summary report. A full report is also available on the OPRD website at <http://egov.oregon.gov/OPRD/PLANS/SCORP.shtml>.