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**New study sheds light on recreational user conflicts**  
*Input from trail users will affect future planning efforts for state trails*

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Madison, Wis.—Can hikers, bikers, birders and horseback riders peacefully co-exist with snowmobilers and ATV users on Wisconsin’s state trails? Finding answers to that and other questions was the goal of a two-year study conducted by the University of Wisconsin-Extension and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

“In Wisconsin, we have many recreational users,” says Dave Marcouiller, natural resource economist with the University of Wisconsin-Extension and study co-author. “Most of the time, recreation in state parks and trails is a positive experience, but conflicts can arise when people use the same setting for widely varying recreational purposes.”

The study’s main goal was to learn how to minimize conflicts among recreational users and make the most of trail activities that complement each other, such as hiking and biking.

Marcouiller, UW-Extension educators Bob Kazmierski and Mike Kornmann, and DNR planner Jeff Prey surveyed users along a 48-mile section of the Gandy Dancer state trail from Danbury to St. Croix Falls. The Gandy Dancer was selected because it is typical of most Wisconsin trails with its crushed limestone surface over a converted rail bed. Researchers approached trail users at natural stopping points and asked them to take a short survey, which was followed up later with a mail survey. The researchers also conducted focus group interviews.

Some key findings included:

--On average, trail users spent roughly $118 per visit in Polk and Burnett counties. When expanded to annual estimates, this translates to around $3.3 million in spending that trail users bring into the area.
--Most users of the Gandy Dancer trail lived nearby or came from the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area.
--Recreational use pressures were highest in the summer and dominated by hikers and bikers, while winter use depended on the weather and was dominated by snowmobilers.
--In general, hikers and bikers visited the trail for exercise, peace and quiet while snowmobilers were motivated by enough snow and an available trail.
--Hiking and biking were generally compatible, but they competed with ATV use and hunting. Snowmobiling was a better fit with ATV use and hunting.
Hikers and bikers tended to take part in other non-motorized recreational activities, while snowmobilers were more apt to hunt and partake in other motorized activities.

“One of the nice things about Wisconsin trails is that they experience use which is seasonally segregated,” says Marcouiller. “For example, people use snowmobiles only in the winter, so they aren’t as much of an issue with non-mechanized sports.”

ATV use is currently in the public eye, however, as the debate continues on whether to open up more state trails to ATV users. “ATVs and snowmobiles are important to many users,” says Marcouiller.

Another important aspect of the Gandy Dancer study is that the feedback came from trail users, rather than recreational managers. “This work extends and expands findings from the previous Wisconsin Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, or SCORP,” says Marcouiller. “Understanding user interaction will be a central issue in considering recreational use compatibility for the upcoming 2011-2016 SCORP, which will begin early next year.”

Marcouiller and his colleagues expect the study results will also have uses for managing other public lands, such as county and local parks. “This study will lead to improved management and better future development of trails and the communities around them,” he says.

For more information, a new publication about the study, “Trails and Their Gateway Communities” A Case Study of Recreational Use Compatibility and Economic Impacts,” is available from the Cooperative Extension Learning Store at http://learningstore.uwex.edu/Community-C256.aspx.

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