

March 4, 2025

NERCRD Factsheet

## Monongahela National Forest Tourism Surveys: Overview of Findings

The Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development helped bring together a team of researchers and educators from Penn State University and West Virginia University with local community leaders to survey residents of and visitors to the Monongahela National Forest (MNF) Region about their opinions and preferences regarding tourism in the region. The region includes Tucker, Randolph, Grant, Pendleton, Pocahontas, Webster, Nicholas, and Greenbrier counties and visitors from the main target markets of Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Virginia.

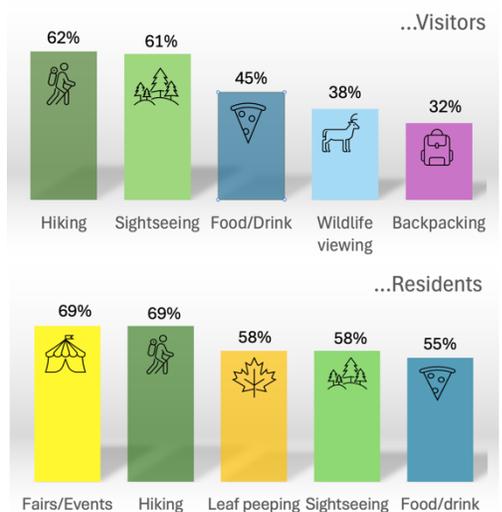
Nearly two-thirds (70%) of **visitors** stayed overnight, while 30% were day trippers. One quarter of overnight visitors camped while 33% stayed in a hotel and 12% stayed with friends/relatives. One in five visitors stayed in an AirBnB. About three-quarters of the visitors were between 18-44 years of age. Most (72%) reported an annual household income of less than \$100,000 before taxes. Sixty percent were visiting for the first time while 37% had visited between two and five times. Most traveled in pairs or in groups of three to five people (about 43% each). Fifty-three percent of visitors spent \$500 or less in group spending/trip. Half (50%) of the visitors listed Pocahontas County as their destination, followed by Greenbrier (38%) and Pendleton (35%). The top activities mentioned by visitors and residents are shown in the adjacent graphic.

Sixty percent of the local **residents** surveyed were 45 years of age or older. About 20% had some role in the local tourism economy, and forty percent had visited another county in the MNF Region ten times or more within the last year for leisure purposes: Tucker (mentioned by 55%), Pocahontas (52%), Greenbrier (43%), Randolph (38%), and Pendleton (37%). Highland Scenic Highway, Blackwater Falls, Seneca Rocks, Snowshoe Mountain Resort, Canaan Valley Resort, and Spruce Knob are the most-visited places. Visitation patterns are shown in the heat maps below.

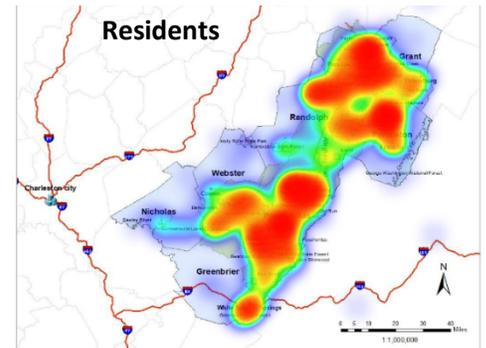
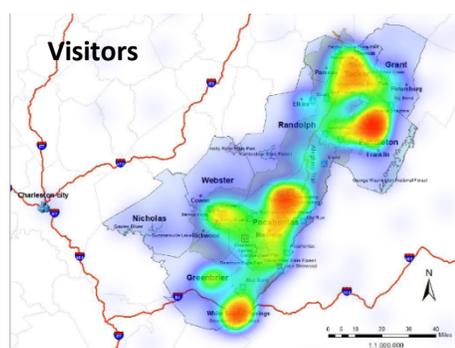
Visitors and residents were asked which factors or indicators are most important to measure when considering the sustainability of tourism in a given area. This information reveals which local assets residents value most, and it can also be used to identify areas most in need of improvement. **Residents** ranked environmental factors as being most important. However, they were also concerned about socio-economic indicators, notably the improvement of the well-being of rural communities through tourism, and cultural indicators such as celebration and protection of intangible cultural heritage.

**Visitors** also ranked environmental quality, protection of the natural environment and waste management as being important but thought economic opportunities from tourism or the improvement of the well-being or rural communities from tourism development were less important.

Activities participated in by...



Heat maps for areas visited by Visitors and Residents (red is most visited, followed by yellow)



Visitors and residents were also asked how well they thought the MNF region performed on the same indicators. **Visitors** thought the MNF Region performed well on environmental indicators (including rural authenticity) but poorly on economic indicators such as high-paying jobs from tourism development, career opportunities in tourism, investment in tourism development. Similarly, **residents** felt the region performed well on environmental indicators but, dissimilarly, poorly on institutional indicators such as evidence of links and engagement with other bodies, a clearly stated and visible destination management strategy/plan, and systems to monitor and respond to impacts from tourism development. These findings suggest that the challenge for the MNF region, and many other areas, is to

Ranking of Top 10 Tourism Indicators' Importance by Residents and Visitors (1= highest importance)

Indicator	Residents	Visitors
Environmental quality	1	2
Protection of the natural environment	2	1
Management of waste	3	3
Control of negative impacts through long-term planning	4	7
Improvement of the well-being of rural communities from tourism development	5	11
Economic opportunities from tourism	6	21
Celebration and protection of intangible cultural heritage, including local traditions, arts, music, language, food and other aspects of local identity and distinctiveness	7	5
Guidelines for visitor behavior at sensitive sites and cultural events being made available to visitors	8	6
Accurate interpretive material that informs visitors of the significance of the cultural and natural aspects of the sites they visit	9	9
Contribution to community and sustainability initiatives in a responsible manner from enterprises, visitors, and the public	10	10

improve the well-being of communities through tourism, secure local leaders' support for tourism development, create more economic opportunities from tourism development, invest in tourism development, and develop systems to monitor and manage the impacts of tourism over time. *Residents felt strongly that long-term planning and managed growth are important to control any negative impacts of tourism*, that tourism development can provide more local economic opportunities, that the area should invest in tourism development and do more to promote its tourism assets to visitors.

**Visitors** indicated that the MNF region performed *somewhat better* than similar destinations in terms of outdoor recreation opportunities, natural attractions, rural authenticity, level of crowding, festivals and events, prices, and hospitality and friendliness of local residents, while **residents** thought that the ANF region performed slightly better than similar destinations they had visited on level of crowding, rural tranquility and authenticity, prices, and outdoor recreation opportunities. The adjacent word cloud shows what attributes residents think of the most when considering the desirability of the ANF Region. Positive experiences identified by visitors included scenery and nature, outdoor recreation opportunities, people, and rural character while residents identified natural resources, recreational activities, and business and economic development as regional strengths. Negative experiences were related to infrastructure, crowding, weather, management, cost, and food/lodging while residents reported lack of infrastructure, culture and community, and lack of funding and investments as regional weaknesses. *According to visitors, opportunities to increase competitiveness included advertising more, developing more attractions, maintaining authenticity, and more amenities and lodging while residents identified improved marketing and infrastructure and increased amenities, activities and lodging.*



**METHODS:** A survey of visitors to the Monongahela National Forest region of West Virginia was conducted in March, 2023 using the Prolific online survey platform. 574 valid responses were retained for further analysis. A corresponding survey was developed for residents of the eight-county region that surrounds the area of the Monongahela National Forest in West Virginia including Tucker, Randolph, Grant, Pendleton, Pocahontas, Greenbrier, Nicholas, and Webster counties. The survey collected responses from May, 2024 through February, 2025 resulting in 193 valid responses. **The resident survey results should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size obtained to date;** for the full reports and related resources, please see: <https://nercrd.psu.edu/tourism-research-in-allegheny-national-forest/>

**Funding acknowledgement:** This Report is part of a larger collaborative project among West Virginia University, Penn State University, the University of Vermont, and the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development, based at Penn State. Specific grant funding sources for the present study include USDA AFRI (#2022-68006-3645), USDA McIntire Stennis Program (#WVA00803), USDA Multistate Hatch Project (NE2251), USDA NIFA (#2022-51150-38139) and the Pennsylvania State University, College of Agricultural Sciences.

