

The World of Watchers: An Assessment of the Implications of the Preliminary U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation

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The preliminary data presented in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) 2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation shows that wildlife viewing increased by 5% between 1996 and 2001. Over 66 million Americans are now engaged in wildlife viewing. Residential wildlife watching increased by 4%, while nonresidential decreased by 8%.

Wildlife viewing is the only wildlife-related recreation to have experienced an increase during the most recent survey period. Wildlife-related recreation as a whole declined by 5%. Hunting declined by 7% during this period, and fishing by 3%. All forms of hunting (small game, migratory birds, and big game) and fishing (salt water, fresh water) declined during this period.

Total Number of Participants (1000s)

Type of Participation	Number 1996	Number 2001	Percent Change	Number Change
Wildlife Watching	62,868	66,106	+5%	+3,238
Fishing	39,694	37,805	-5%	-1,889
Hunting	13,975	13,034	-3%	-941

Wildlife-related recreation expenditures declined by 14%. This is a surprisingly large drop given that it occurred during one of the most prosperous periods in the nation's history. Fishing expenditures declined by 17%, while hunting expenditures declined by 12%. **Wildlife-watching expenditures, however, increased by 11%, with equipment-related expenditures increasing by 90% since 1991.** All categories of fishing and hunting expenditures declined during the survey period.

Total Expenditures (\$1000s)

Expenditures	1996 \$	2001 \$	Percent Change	Amount Change
Wildlife Watching	30,392,338	33,730,868	+11	+3,338,530
Fishing	42,710,679	35,632,132	-17%	-7,078,547
Hunting	23,293,156	20,611,025	-12%	-2,682,131

What should viewing site managers, nature tourism developers, and others make of these numbers? How should this survey's results be reconciled with others such as Ken Cordell's *National Survey of Recreation and the Environment* or Responsive Management's recent survey for Ducks Unlimited (Duda, 2002)?

The USFWS definition of wildlife viewing is far more restrictive than that used by Fermata and others. The USFWS limits non-residential wildlife viewing to the narrow segment that travels for the "primary purpose" of wildlife watching. Secondary wildlife-watching activities such as "incidentally observing wildlife while pleasure driving" are not included. For those who view, feed, or photograph wildlife around the home, USFWS is only interested in participants who take a "special interest" in wildlife around their homes. In other words, the USFWS is only counting those Americans for whom wildlife is a primary recreational pursuit.

In Fermata, wildlife viewers are defined as being the world of recreationists who find their way to nature through wildlife. Along the same lines, Fermata consider birders to be those who find their way to nature through birds. This is a far more expansive definition of wildlife watching than that used by the USFWS. Yet as the overall declines documented in the USFWS imply, the real concern we should all share (hunters, anglers, and birders alike) is the growing number of Americans who never find their way to nature *at all*.

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The USFWS survey largely misses the most casual or least committed end of the wildlife watching spectrum, the *uninitiated*. At a minimum, hunters and anglers must purchase licenses, and therefore can be counted no matter their level of involvement. But at what moment does a birder, for example, become a birder? Why must wildlife viewing be a “special interest” before the person engaged in the activity is considered to be a residential wildlife watcher? Why must someone take a trip of at least one mile for the “primary” purpose of wildlife watching before they appear on the USFWS radar screen? What if the primary purpose of a person’s trip is to visit family, but during their stay they watch wildlife around the house with their relatives? Aren’t these people wildlife watchers? If the same person were to make the same trip to spend an afternoon with their relatives fishing, they would certainly be counted by virtue of the fact that they had to purchase a license. In wildlife viewing, the difficulty is with the definition.

Wildlife watching has exceptionally soft edges. The USFWS professionals who administer these surveys are attempting to delineate an amorphous recreation in such a way so that it can be compared to hunting and fishing. For wildlife agencies this is an all-important comparison. Budgets are determined, programs are supported or cut, and personnel hired or eliminated - based on these results.

Yet the lack of sensitivity in this survey to the population of uninitiated wildlife watchers leads me to caution those who would read too much into these results. Hunting recruitment (as reflected, for example, by the average age of a person purchasing their first hunting license, or the average age of a given hunting population) is weak in most states. Wildlife viewing may well be (as I believe) a more significant portal or entry point for those urbanites finding their way to nature for the first time. In fact, the number of Americans entering the ranks of wildlife viewers (over 3 million) between 1996 and 2001 more than offset the losses in hunting and fishing. If we are not measuring this recruitment (and the USFWS does not) then how are we to gauge our effectiveness in attracting more Americans into a relationship with nature and wildlife?

We should be investing in those recreation activities such as wildlife viewing that are proven to be effective in attracting the *disengaged* to the outdoors.

In the end, isn’t that the issue we should be focused on? My friend Andy Sansom, former executive director of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, often said that there were only two types of people in the world: those that cared about nature, and those that didn’t. The Americans who do not care are not evil or malevolent; they simply have yet to find their way to nature. We should be investing in those recreation activities such as wildlife viewing that are proven to be effective in attracting the *disengaged* to the outdoors.