

Criterion 6. Maintenance and Enhancement of Long-Term Multiple Socioeconomic Benefits To Meet the Needs of Societies

National Report on Sustainable Forests—2010

Indicator 6.44.

The Importance of Forests to People

What is the indicator and why is it important?

Forests are important to people for a wide variety of reasons. Research studies have enumerated the breadth of values that people associate with forests. These values are provided, to greater and lesser degrees, by different types of forests, groves of trees, and even by individual trees. The lists suggest a mix of values that extend from consumptive to nonconsumptive uses and include items that relate to economic, ecological, and social benefits.

This indicator provides information on the range of values communities and individuals hold for forests. These values shape the way people view forests, including their behaviors and attitudes toward all aspects of forest management. This indicator can be used to help understand regional or demographic differences in the importance of trees and forests to people and to monitor changes in perception of the importance of trees and forests over time.

What does the indicator show?

Over the course of 2008, 26 focus groups with 202 individuals were conducted with a diversity of populations across the United States to determine similarities and differences with respect to the importance of forests. Diversity was represented by age, gender, geographic location, race, and ethnicity. The sample consisted of: six college student focus groups, five groups of urban African Americans, two groups each of urban high school students, Native Americans, and rural adults; and one group each of rural high school students, urban Arab Americans, urban senior citizens, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Caucasians.

Participants offered a very wide range of reasons why forests were important to them personally and to their communities (table 44-1). The depth and breadth of the discussions support and expand on earlier research indicating trees and forests are important to Americans in diverse ways and they are able to clearly articulate this importance.

Table 44-1. Frequency of mention by categories of importance of trees and forests to individuals and their communities.

Category	Descriptors	Frequency
Environmental/Biological		406
Animals	Wildlife/animals	75
Air	Breathing, cycle	69
Shade	Shade in summer	60
Water	Water, clean, cycle	51
Processes	Succession, C, N, fire	39
Ecological relationships	Links, phenology	30
Shelter		28
Climate change	Global climate change	11
Plants	trees and other plants	9
Cultural Heritage		320
Memories	Memories, childhood	78
Community	Unite, pride, patriotism	82
Family relations	Associate with family	62
Traditional knowledge	Rural, TEK, medicine	43
Community service	Service trip, planting	31
Literature and folklore	Fairytales, archetype	20
Products		287
Wood products	Fuel, timber, material	176
Nonwood Products	Medicine, food, fish, and so on	87
Recreation		271
Nonconsumptive activities	Camping, hiking, play	189
Consumptive activities	Hunting, fishing, etc.	58
Adventure	Exploring, challenge, risk	24
Sense of Place		200
Identity	Community, history	74
Attachment	Rootedness, part of life	67
Individual trees	Favorite tree, neighbor	38
Dependence	Nearby nature, daily use	20
Health and Well-being		199
Psychological benefits	Quiet, comfort, refuge	112
Well-being activities	Sensory, reading, etc.	64
Aesthetics		160
	Beauty, splendor	
Spiritual		114
	Happiness, growth, intrinsic, stewardship	
Diversity		80
Habitat		35
Biodiversity		22
Forest type		18
Economics	Revenue, livelihood	72
Education		67
Privacy	Separation, borders	33

TEK = Traditional Ecological Knowledge.

Note: Frequencies within categories do not sum to the total because some responses were coded to the first-level category only.

Focus group participants also discussed ways their interactions with trees and forests have changed over their lifetime, (table 44-2), negative feelings they have about forests (table 44-3) and concerns they have about forests (table 44-4).

The results of the focus groups clearly indicate that forests are important to Americans in many ways and that a broad cross-section of Americans are able to articulate these factors. The results also show that Americans have multiple concerns about the future of forests.

Although many similarities exist across the diverse focus group participants, the data suggest some differences based on race and ethnicity (feelings of exclusion and fear associated with forests among African-Americans), rural versus urban geography (rural respondents were more concerned with forest policy and management issues and forest degradation and urban

Table 44-2. Changes in people's interactions with trees and forests over their lifetime.

Changes over lifetime	Frequency
Interactions/perspectives: more/less interaction, care more, understand more	125
Reduced natural resources: fewer fish/wildlife, water trees	42
Policy/Politics: more conservation, less access, more management, loss of rights	23
Competition: competing resources, development	17
Economic changes: increased costs, fewer rural jobs	6
Pollution: trash, traffic, noise	4
Increased natural resources: more fish/wildlife, water, trees	3

Table 44-3. Negative feelings people have about trees and forests.

Changes over lifetime	Frequency
Tree/home interactions: fall on house, disturb plumbing, maintenance costs, leaf litter	59
Safety and fear: being lost, images of lynching	29
Animals: bugs, spiders, disease, negative wildlife interactions	32
Plants: poison ivy, allergies, invasive species, thorns	22
Management: privatization, restricted use, lack of management, deforestation	20
Restricted use/exclusion: feeling "out of place," discriminatory, exclusionary	16

respondents were more concerned with damage to their home), and age (younger respondents actively interacted with forests and to older respondents aesthetics and the trees they could see out their windows were more important). These differences reinforce the need to reflect the demographic diversity of the United States when considering the acceptability of forest management activities focused on sustainability.

Why can't the entire indicator be reported at this time?

Although this research has provided a number of categories and descriptions of values related to the environment and forests, no studies were found presenting a statistically robust national sample that would allow for analysis of differences in values based on geographic location across the country, ethnicity, occupation, age, urban or rural residence, gender, or many other socio-demographic or cultural variables. In addition, no known studies have documented the intensity, structure, or correlation of values for forests at this scale. Finally, no known research exists that has monitored how these values change over time. Future research is needed to provide this information and develop a protocol to elicit information that can be replicated over time to monitor trends in these values across population segments.

Table 44-4. Concerns people have about trees and forests.

Changes over lifetime	Frequency
Degradation: pollution, GMOs, plantations, fire, clearcutting, fragmentation, land conversion	143
Sustainability: use of resources, environmental effect, human overpopulation	73
Management and policy: mismanagement, loss of grazing rights, activism, local knowledge	58
Forest condition: changes, disturbance regimes, Invasive species, global warming	57
Lost connections: detachment, shallow understanding, less experience with large forests	43
Competition: competing resources, development	24
Economics: jobs, livelihoods, revenue	8
Urban ecosystems: development, lack of trees in urban areas, urbanization	6

GMO = genetically modified organisms.