

A Visitor Assessment of Florida National Scenic Trail Visitors on St. Johns River Water Management District Lands



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Introduction to the Project

From the summer of 2003 through the summer of 2008, researchers from the University of Florida studied visitors on the Florida National Scenic Trail (FNST). The Trail traverses almost the whole state from Pensacola to Big Cypress National Preserve. Researchers studied visitors to the Trail on public lands throughout the state with the cooperation of every type of public land agency. This includes the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, US Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Department of Defense, Florida Division of Forestry, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Florida State Parks, and Florida's water management districts (Northwest Florida, Suwannee River, St. Johns River, Southwest Florida, and South Florida).

The project consisted of two main parts: to count visitors and to understand who they are and why they use the Trail. In order to count visitors, mechanical counters (either infrared or pressure sensitive pads) were placed along the FNST near trailheads. This gave researchers 24 hour monitoring capabilities. Each site had a counter installed for one or more years, so seasonal fluctuations could be studied. The data were analyzed monthly and cleaned to correct for

counts triggered by wildlife or meteorological events. This produced fairly reliable counts for each section of the Trail that was monitored. In some instances, counters were not installed. Instead, different sampling strategies were used that included visual monitoring, permits, and other strategies.

A questionnaire was also administered to better understand the recreation habits and motivations of visitors to the FNST. Trained surveyors questioned visitors about their demographics, desired experiences, satisfaction, and other recreation activities involved in while on the Trail. This portion of the study was also completed in areas all over the State and on lands representing all the different types of land management agencies in Florida. However, no questionnaires were administered on lands managed specifically by the SJRWMD.

The following report is a summary of the results of the visitor counts for both of the SJRWMD lands where the study was conducted. Hopefully, this report will help the SJRWMD personnel better understand the recreation habits of visitors to their lands.



Rice Creek Conservation Area

Background

Preliminary research performed in 2001-2002 indicated that Rice Creek Conservation Area (RCCA) should be classified as a low use site, receiving 364 visits or less per year. The FNST through RCCA experienced heavy flooding and some trail destruction from the 2004 hurricane season. As a result, this section of trail was closed to the public from September 3 –

November 15, 2004, and survey periods had to be canceled.

Estimation of Visitors

An infrared eye was installed in June 2004 to gather information on the number of visits the trail received during the study year. The results are shown below.

Table 1. Use of the Florida National Scenic Trail at Rice Creek Conservation Area: June 2004-May 2005

Access Pt.	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	TOTAL
RCCA	11	3	29	0	0	13	20	11	8	12	16	5	127

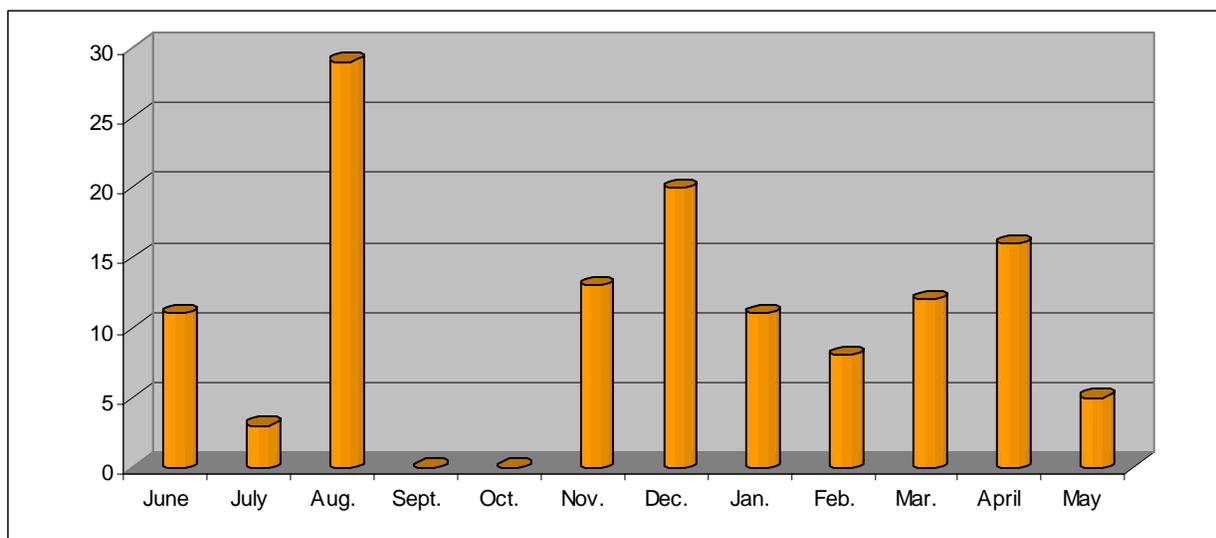


Figure 1. Use of the Florida National Scenic Trail at Rice Creek Conservation Area: June 2004-May 2005

Bull Creek Wildlife Management Area

2006-2007 Use

Counter Type:

- US 192: Diamond Traffics infrared eye.
- Crabgrass Road: Diamond Traffics infrared eye.

Counter-related problems and solutions:

- US 192: Counter worked well throughout the study period.
- Crabgrass Road: Counter worked well throughout the study period except for in August someone shot the reflector. The reflector was replaced.

Trail condition throughout the year:

- US 192: Trail was in good condition throughout the study period.

- Crabgrass Road: Trail was in good condition throughout the year. Parts of the trail had standing water during wet periods.

Estimation of Visitors

Bull Creek Wildlife Management Area is a medium use site, receiving 999 estimated visits in 2006-2007. Initial research conducted in 2003-2004 indicated that Bull Creek was probably a low use site, however the 2006-2007 season indicated it was a medium use site. The highest use month was November with 118 estimated visits and the lowest use month was July with an estimated 29 visits. One access point was monitored with an infrared counter and one was visually monitored.

Table 2. Use of the Florida Trail at Bull Creek WMA June 2006- May 2007

Access Pt.	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	TOTAL
US 192	13	4	10	9	11	4	9	11	13	27	34	25	170
Crabgrass Rd.	46	25	27	65	83	114	93	65	49	126	70	66	829
TOTAL	59	29	37	74	94	118	102	76	62	153	104	91	999

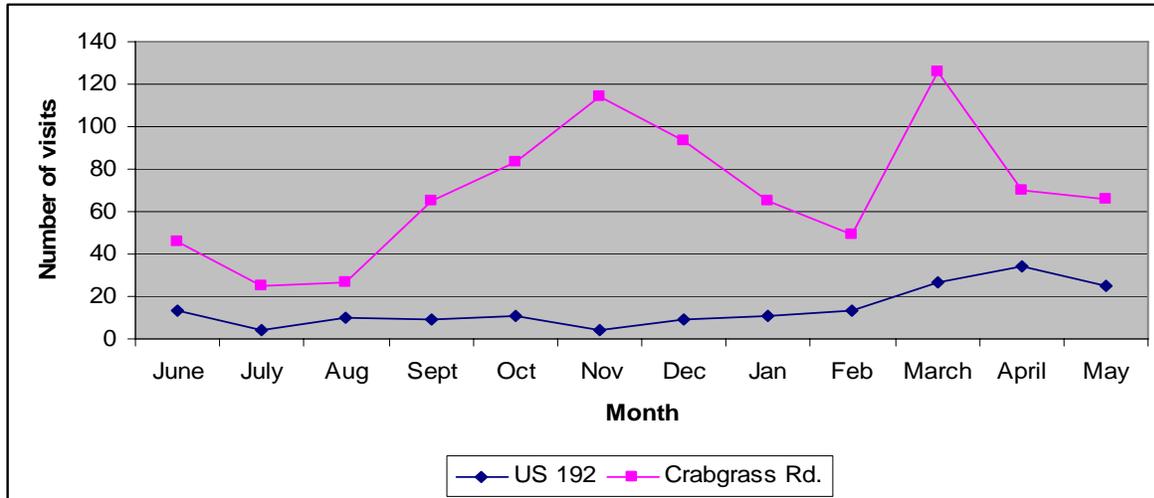


Figure 2. Use of the Florida National Scenic Trail at Bull Creek WMA: June 2006- May 2007

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