The Florida National Scenic Trail
Decade Assessment

Assessment Directory

Introduction 1
Methods 2
Trail Analysis
FNST Visitors 3
Number of Visitors
FNST Site Comparison 4
Visitor Demographics 5
Motivations 6
Attractions 7
Conclusion 8

Photos provided by USDA Forest Service, National Forests in Florida

Introduction

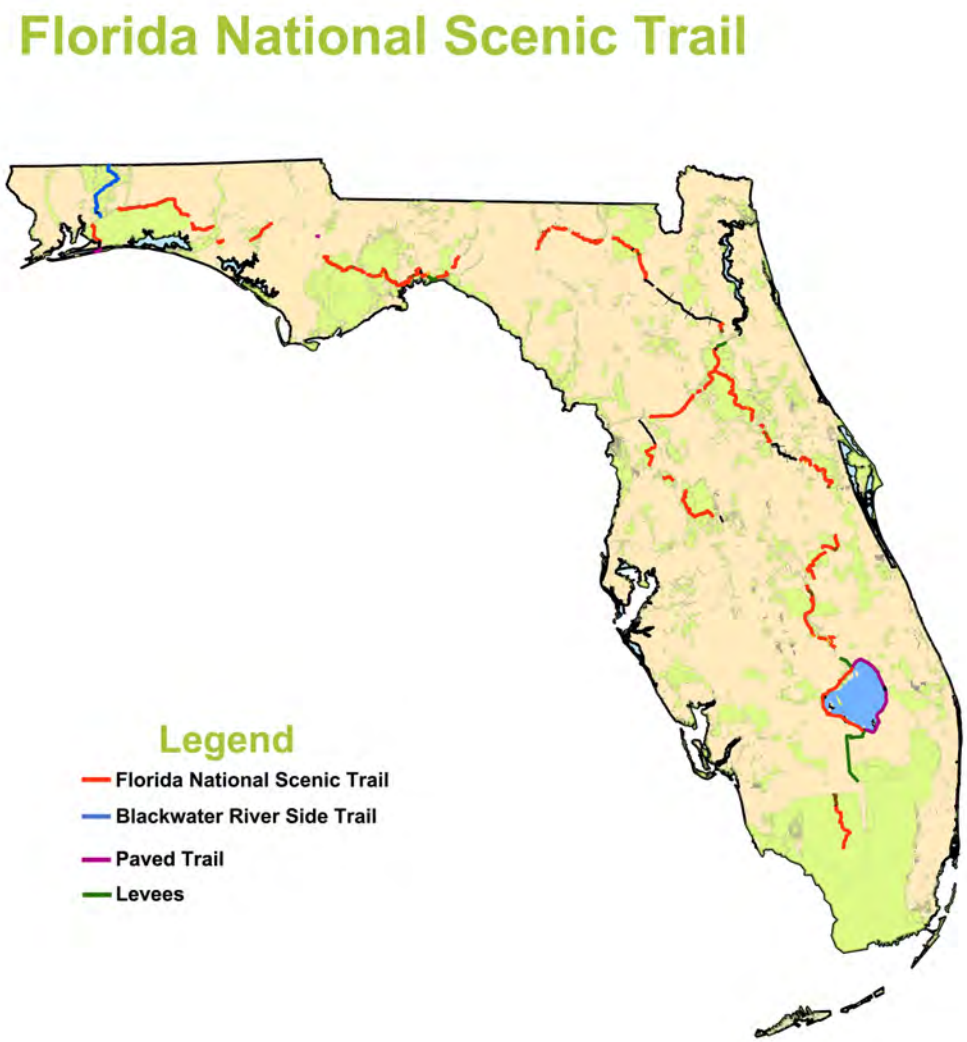
Study Background

The University of Florida's School of Forest Resources and Conservation (SFRC) began a collaborative visitor assessment project for the Florida National Scenic Trail (FNST) with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and the Florida Trail Association (FTA) in June of 2003.

The purpose of the study is two-fold:

- Determine reliable use estimate of annual trail visits to 27 segments of the trail.
- Gather information on who FNST visitors are and why they visit the trail.

Over the past 10 years, the assessment has helped to form reliable use estimates of the trail from each study site within a given year, which then can be inferred to all FNST survey sections that are yet to be studied. This then helps to create a trail-wide estimate. Trail users are described in terms of their socio-demographics, trip characteristics, and level of satisfaction.



Methods

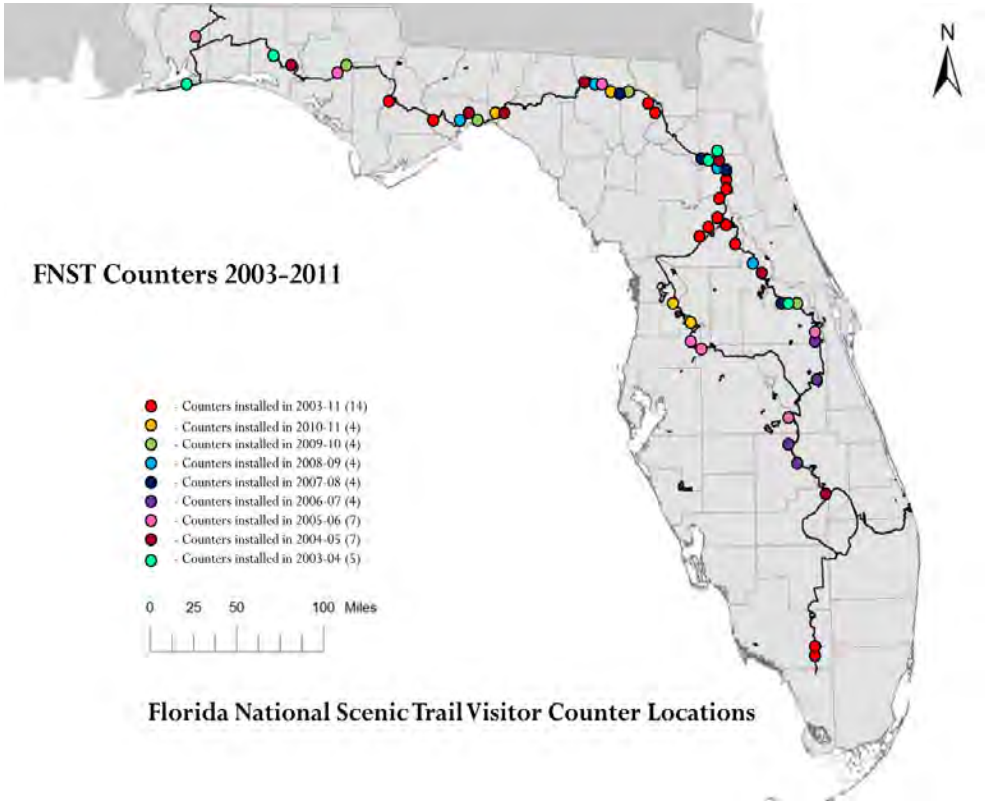
Trail Analysis

In 2002, an initial assessment of FNST use took place. Researchers contacted section leaders and land managers to develop an initial estimate of FNST visitation. Through these conversations, researchers identified sections that received high, medium, and low use.

The visitors were surveyed at selected section trailheads by pedestrian counters and questionnaires. The 27 chosen segments of the FNST were surveyed based on their level of use and revisited again from 2009 to 2012 to improve counter methods.

For the first five years of the assessment, mail-back questionnaires were used but because of a low response rate this method was changed to on-line interviews, exclusively. The response rate increased to over 85%.

.



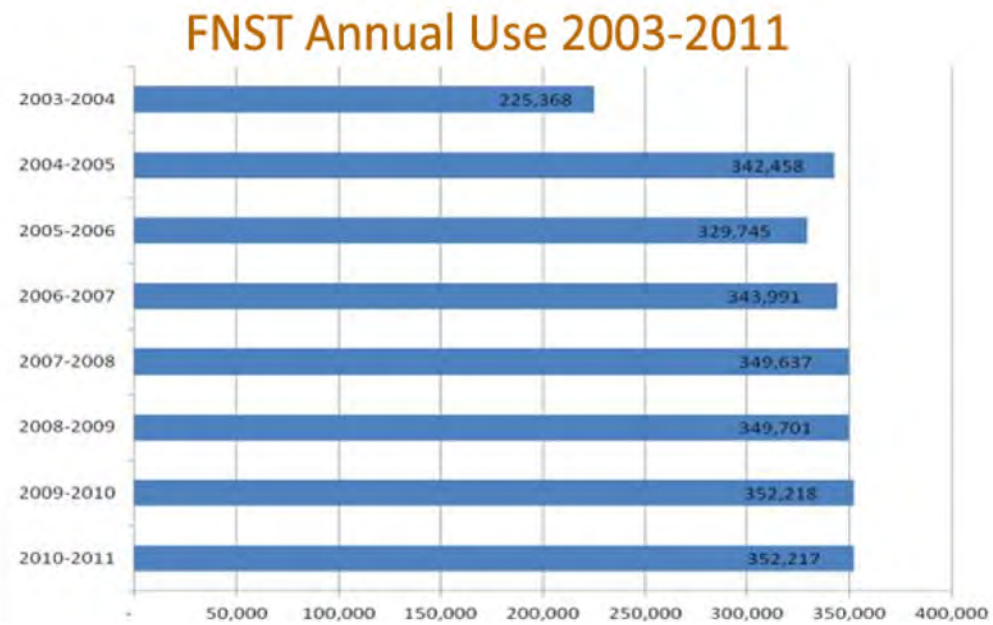
FNST Visitors

Number of Visitors

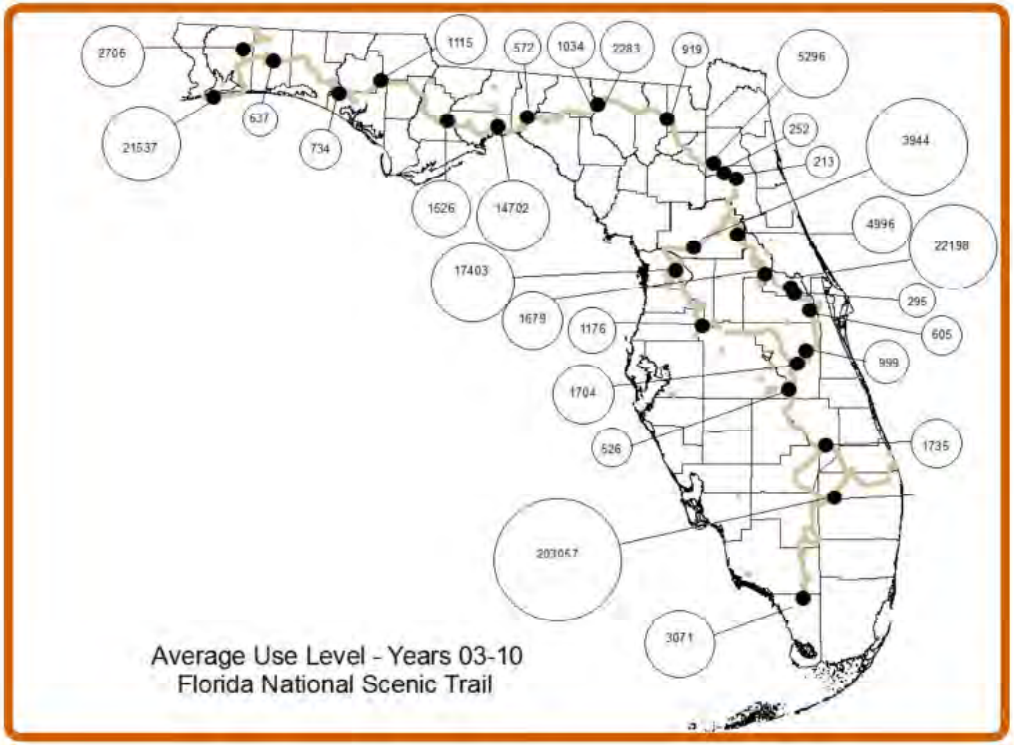
In 2010-2011, 352,217 people used the trail:

- 51.9% were pedestrians (182,882)
- 48.1% were other users (169,335)

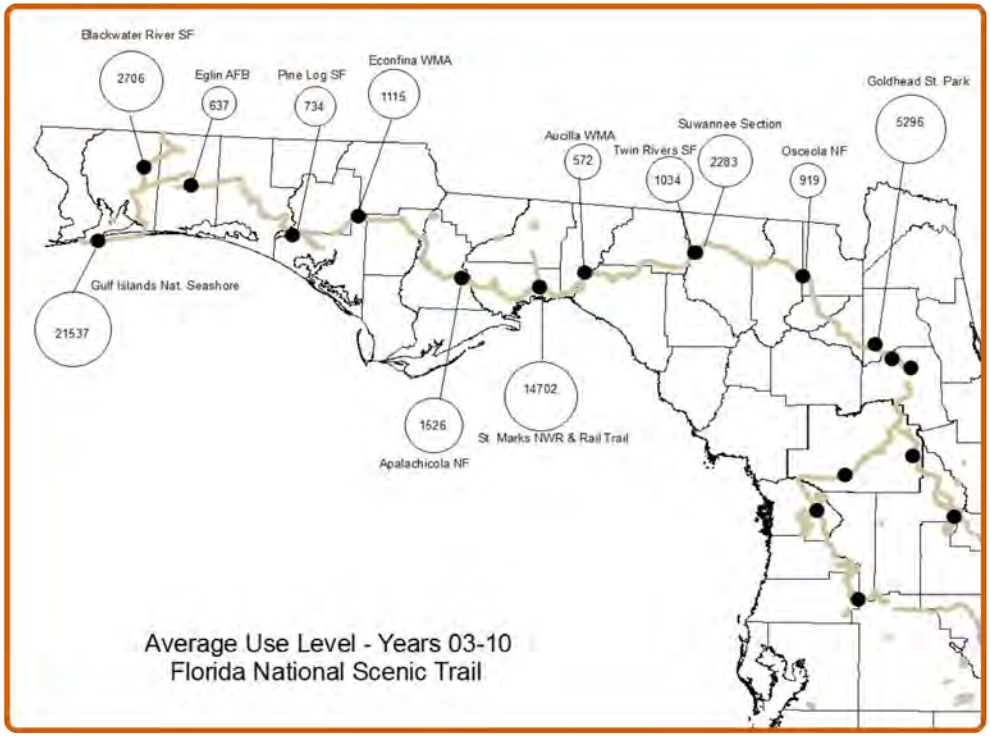
The visitor flow varies greatly by season. Between October and May there are about 317,800 trail users and about 34,000 from June to September.

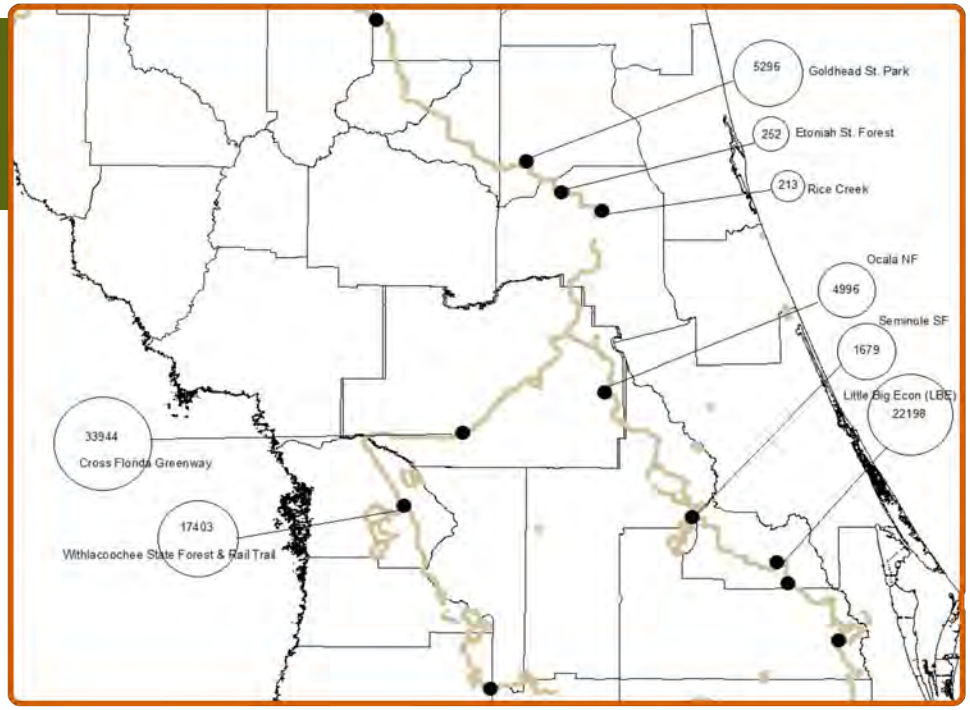


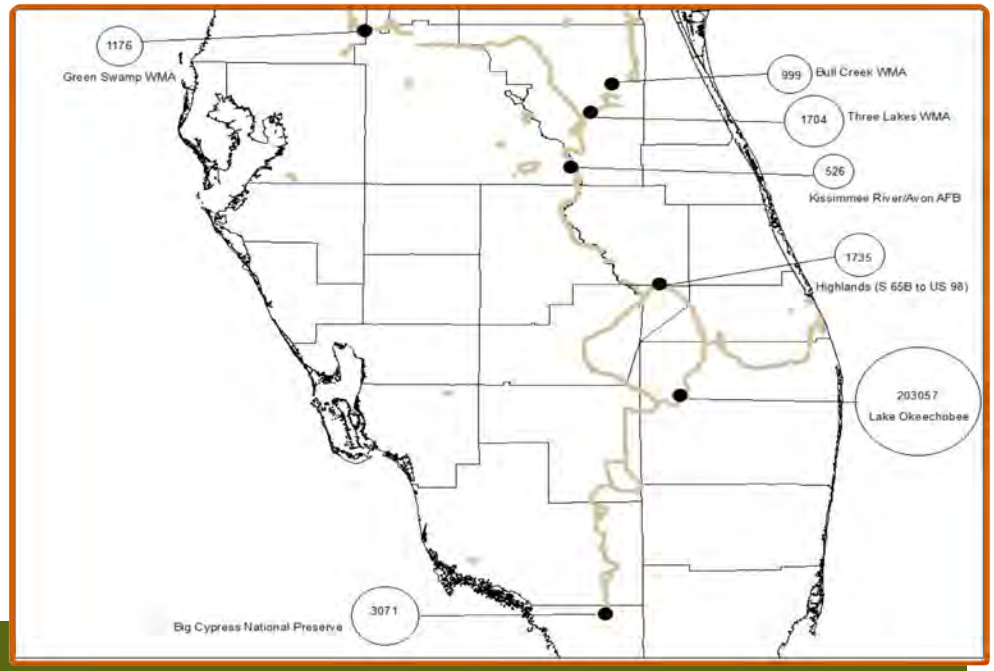
Use also varies by area. Most use occurs in the Lake Ockechobee section, but other popular recreation areas (e.g., Big Cypress National Preserve and Ocala National Forest) receive relatively high use along with areas close to urban areas (e.g., Little Big Econ and Seminole state forests).



Site Comparison







Visitor Demographics

Who visits the FNST?

Approximately 63% of FNST users had been on the trail before and two-thirds of visitors travel less than 20 miles to get to the trail.

The typical FNST user is:

- Male
- Over 40 years old
- Married
- Educated
- White/Caucasian
- Middle or high income

In the early years of the study, the most common information sources visitors used to learn about the FNST were family and friends. In recent years, the Internet has shown to be an important resource to gather information about the trail.

A little less than half of all visitors spend an hour or less on the trail and almost 75% of people travel alone or have one other person in their party. FNST visitors are generally happy with the trail, with more than one-third of trail users rating their experience as perfect – only three percent are unsatisfied with their experience on the trail.

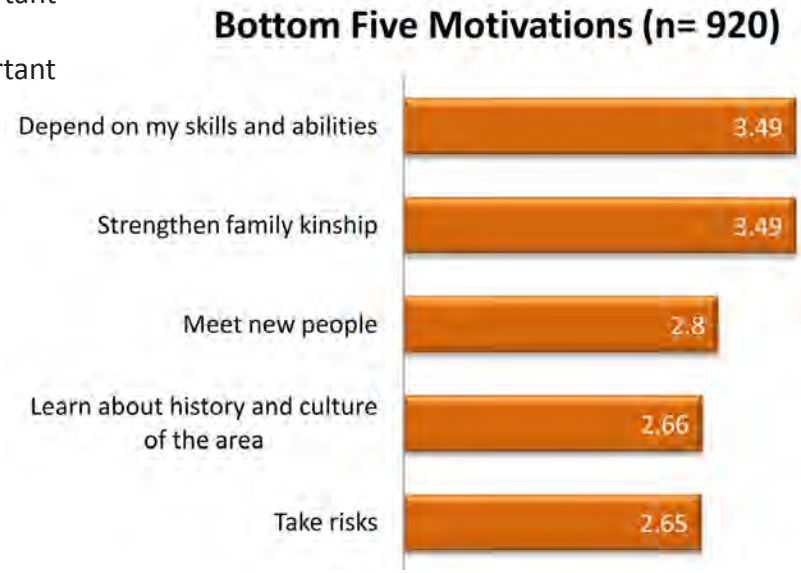
		Percent %
Gender (n=1594)	Male	63.2
	Female	36.8
Age (n=1174)	60 years or older	18.6
	50 – 59 years old	16.7
	40 – 49 years old	14.5
	30 – 39 years old	10.9
	18 – 29 years old	12.5
Marital status (n=951)	Married	66.4
	Single	22.7
	Divorced	5.8
	Widowed	6.1
Highest level of education (n=1180)	Some high school or less	2.2
	High school graduate/GED	14.3
	Some college	21.7
	College graduate	31.9
	Some graduate school	7.5
	Graduate degree or beyond	22.0
Race/ethnic group (n=943)	White	91.4
	Hispanic/Latino	3.7
	Other	4.9
Household income (n=1065)	$19,999 or less	9.6
	$20,000 - $39,999	16.3
	$40,000 - $59,999	24.5
	$60,000 - $79,999	14.3
	$80,000 - $99,999	11.3
	$100,000 or more	19.0

Motivations

Why do visitors use the trail?

Understanding why visitors recreate on the FNST can help guide how to manage and plan the trail. The top motivations to go on the FNST include to enjoy nature, escape and relieve stress, and promote physical fitness. The least motivating activities were taking risks, learning about local history or culture, and engaging in social experiences.

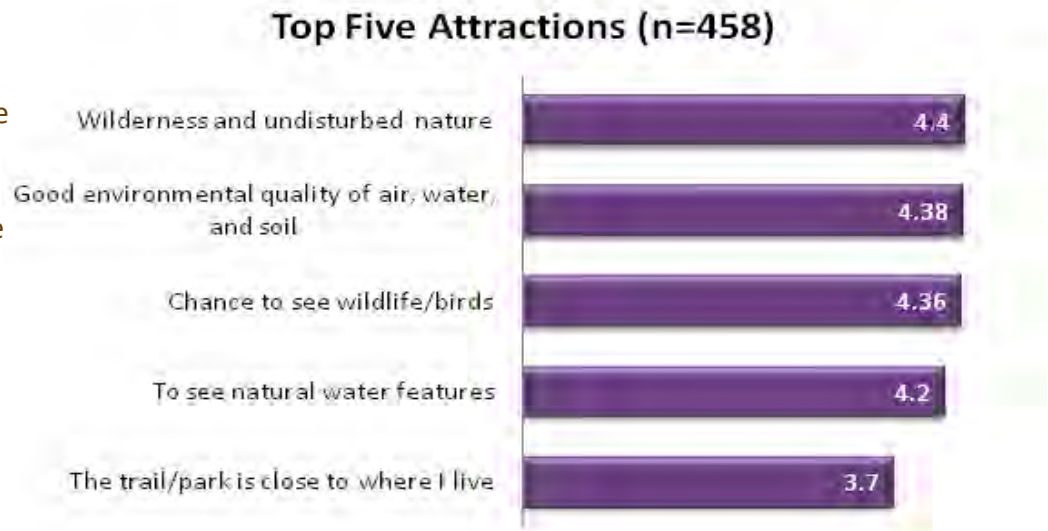
Scale
1 - Least important
3 - Neutral
5 - Most important

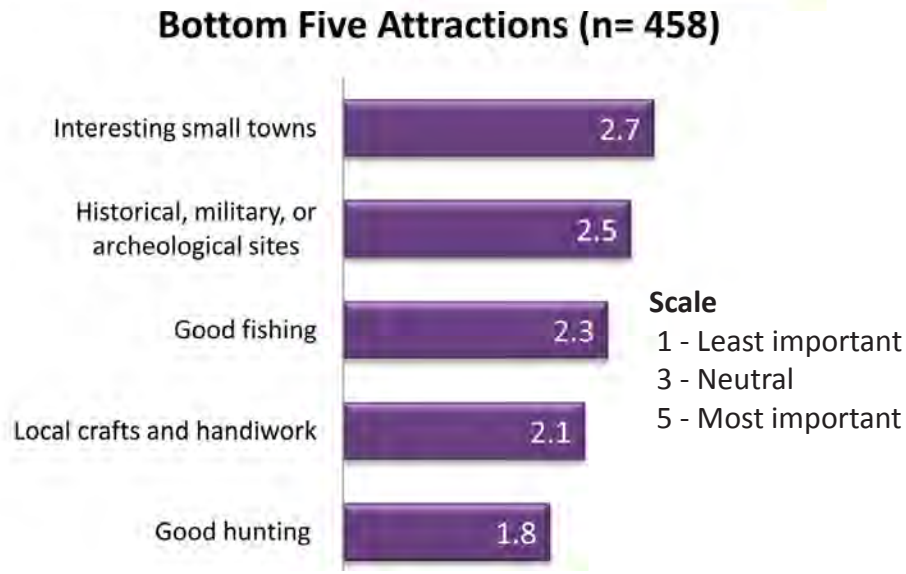


Attractions

What attracts visitors to the trail?

Aside from what motivates people to use the trail, specific aspects of the setting pull users toward the FNST. The top attractions for trail visitors are pristine conditions, good environmental quality, and the chance to see wildlife, specifically birds. The least likely of reasons for visitors to be drawn to the trail includes culture and history, fishing, and hunting.





Conclusion

Major Findings & Recommendations

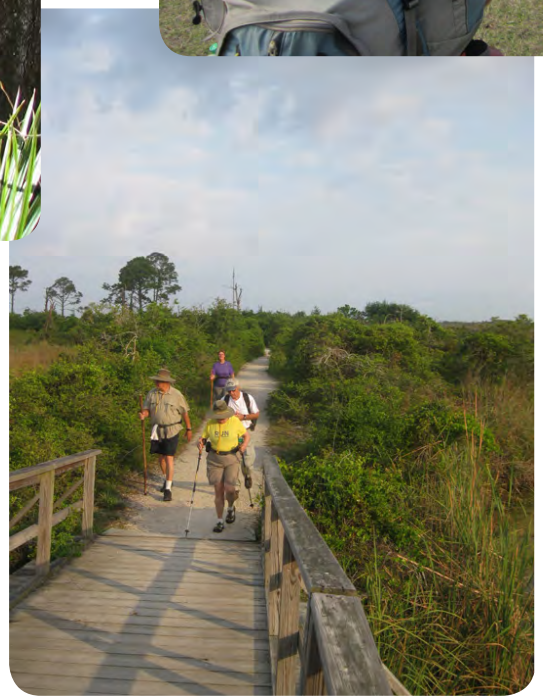
Visitation estimates of the FNST have remained consistently around 350,000 visits since the early years of trail research. Use is focused in a few key areas (e.g., Lake Ockechobee) and during certain seasons (e.g., winter and spring), but visitation can expand throughout the trail.

Above all, the FNST is perceived as an opportunity to receive a relatively pristine experience in a local natural area. Local residents currently have the ability to hike on the trail and many do take advantage of this experience. However, research shows that the FNST is serving a rather specific type of people. If the type of people who use the trail expanded, the FNST would gain more supporters and diversify the benefits provided to local communities, the Florida Trail Association, and agencies that host the FNST.

However, expanding the FNST to a wider demographic might prove to be difficult. The trail is not widely known, and current users do not see that it offers a diverse set of experiences. For example, the trail is not seen as a good opportunity for family experiences, nor is it a place for visitors to experience cultural attractions and communities. In fact, experiences with family and community/culture are commonly mentioned motivations by nature-based recreation visitors at other natural attractions, but were considered of low importance to existing FNST visitors.

The FNST does not have to undergo major structural changes to expand its user base. Expanding FNST opportunities should initially focus around communication efforts. Marketing and promoting existing family and educational opportunities would be a strategic first step to expand the population served by the FNST.

For more information about the Florida National Scenic Trail visit www.fs.usda.gov/fnst.



University of Florida

School of Forest Resources and Conservation

Taylor Stein, Ph.D., Principal Investigator

Angela Colonna, Research Technician

For additional information, email Dr. Stein at tstein@ufl.edu.