



# The Changing Faces of Forest Recreation



Victor Caro

*Latino families enjoy a visit to the Angeles National Forest.*

Surveys and studies help national forest managers understand the recreation needs and preferences of Latinos in southern California.

## Latino Recreation Patterns

Management of national forest recreation has long focused on the needs and habits of White visitors because this traditionally has been the largest group. That is changing all over the country, but nowhere more than in southern California. Here, social scientists are studying the needs and recreation patterns of Latino visitors to better understand this rapidly growing user group.

Latinos are the fastest growing ethnic group in California, according to *Bear Facts* (2004). This ethnic group is projected to grow from 12 million in 2004 to 21 million in 2025, at which point they will make up 40 percent of California's population. Consequently, forest managers will continue to see more visitor diversity, as a greater percentage of Latinos recreate in areas previously used predominantly by White visitors.

Meeting the needs of the changing population likely requires changes in recreation management on national forests. Latinos have many of the same recreation needs as other groups, such as places to recreate and reasonable accommodations, but they also have some unique preferences. They generally prefer greater site development (such as more picnic tables and restrooms) and seem to have a greater tolerance for larger crowds, compared to White visitors, says Deborah Chavez, a supervisory research social scientist at the Pacific Southwest Research Station. The average size of a Latino group is 8 to 15, but can number greater than 100.

National forests are experiencing other changes in recreation use as well. Recent data show that national forest visits nationwide dropped 13 percent from 204.8 million in 2004 to 178.6 million in 2007. Some of

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Science Perspectives

## From Research...

- Surveys indicate that Latinos value picnic areas, parking areas, friendly rangers, and readily available information, such as multilingual signs. Some of these measures can be quite costly, but others, such as multilingual signs and brochures, can be implemented during the normal course of maintenance.
- Latinos approach picnicking differently than other groups. For Latinos, it is often an all-day activity. They may cook several meals onsite, often from scratch. Events can include extended family members and multiple generations.
- Latinos value outdoor recreation opportunities and appreciate efforts to serve their needs. Most are quite willing to share their opinions about site management.

## ...to Management

- Communication is key to bridging cultural differences. To make Latinos feel more welcome in national forests, brochures can include pictures of Latino visitors, and signs can include Spanish translations. Translations can be tricky, however, and Chavez suggests a “back translation” technique, in which a message is translated to Spanish and then translated back to English by a second translator, and the two English statements are compared. The process can be costly, but it helps ensure that the message is accurately translated and properly understood. Alternate communication strategies, such as onsite bilingual hosts, also can be helpful.
- Meeting the needs of Latino visitors may require renovation or equipment upgrades, such as installing larger picnic tables, placing groups of tables close together, and providing several trash receptacles to accommodate larger visitor groups. In places where people are visiting but there are no picnic tables, trash cans could be placed closer to commonly used recreation areas, such as near streambeds. They could be painted a more visible color and labeled “feed me” to encourage use.
- Many Latino visitors speak English and don't mind being approached in English. A resource manager who uses a few Spanish phrases, however, may make the visitors feel more welcome.

## Finding ways to connect: Social science research for understanding Latino recreation use

Deborah Chavez is working to better understand the Latino experience in national forests. This work can be particularly challenging because many Latinos don't respond well to traditional survey methods, such as phone calls and mailed surveys. Even personal interviews require a particular approach.

She has developed a number of methods to improve data collection from Latinos, which can help forest managers gain a better understanding of Latino visits to national forests. “I want to make sure that the information I gather is of use to managers and results in changes to better serve racially and ethnically diverse groups,” says Chavez.

Chavez has conducted many surveys in several locations since she began her studies on Latino recreation visitation in 1990. Through this work, some clear patterns have emerged.

Latinos often have strong feelings about forests. A survey of Mexican-Americans at national forests sites in southern California showed that they consider leisure activity important and think it contributes to family bonding. Both nuclear and extended family members join in leisure activities. They place

particular importance on recreational activities in natural areas, citing a sense of place that helps them feel safe and secure. Several also said that these natural places remind them of their homeland and represent an opportunity to pass on their love of the land to their children.

### Patterns of use

Due to cultural and social factors, Latinos use recreational sites differently than do Whites. Frequently, they have one day off from work per week, and as a result are primarily “day-use” visitors. “This knowledge is critical in determining when use will be heaviest and what sites to concentrate resources toward,” says Chavez.

Some Latinos feel that local city parks may be unsafe, and thus prefer to visit more distant recreation sites such as national parks and forests.

One survey looked at sites in or near Chicago, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis. For each city, the researchers conducted surveys at one urban recreation area and one distant area, such as a national forest or state park. More than half of Latino respondents said they came to the site for physical activities.



Deborah Carr

Latinos recreating at the San Gabriel River on the Angeles National Forest.





*Mariachi band entertaining visitors at the Applewhite Picnic Area on the San Bernardino National Forest.*

Indeed, most Latino respondents said the site where they were contacted was the usual location for their physical activity.

Other surveys have indicated Latinos' outdoor recreation goals include rest, relaxation, fun, and being close to water. Latinos often indicate that they enjoy activities such as hiking and picnicking, which is similar to responses from other racial and ethnic groups. In-depth interviews with Mexican-American visitors revealed that they often brought family members to outdoor recreation sites because it reminded them of their homeland and they wanted to share that experience with their children.

Chavez found that Latinos frequently gather in groups of 8 to 15, with participants including nuclear and extended families. But groups can grow as large as a hundred or more. Latinos often expected to encounter larger crowds. "Size of recreation groups matter for site development decisionmaking. Areas used by large groups may need larger tables, larger sites, or multiple grills, for example," says Chavez. At day-use sites,

picnicking, hiking, and visiting with friends and family were considered the most enjoyable activities by Latino respondents.

Compared to Whites, Latinos placed greater value on site development, such as paved parking lots, grouped and large-sized picnic tables, barbecue grills, trash receptacles, water faucets, and flush toilets. They also expressed greater preference for sites with shade and waterways.

### Constraints

Chavez and other researchers found that despite an overall enthusiasm for visiting national forests, several factors hindered Latinos from making greater use of them.

In a study of Los Angeles County residents, Chavez and her colleagues learned that some of the constraints most strongly experienced by Latinos who found

time to recreate in natural areas (such as forests) included being uncomfortable in the outdoors, finding travel and recreation in natural areas too much trouble, and being discriminated against while traveling to or when recreating in natural areas.

The perception of discrimination has a powerful effect on people. In one study, Chavez found that Latinos perceived much more discrimination than other racial and ethnic groups. Among all respondents, about



*Newly renovated Applewhite Picnic Area on the San Bernardino National Forest.*



12.7 percent believed they had been victimized by discrimination, whereas 32.4 percent of Latinos felt they had been discriminated against. About 2.9 percent of White respondents perceived discrimination.

Respondents also reported that they encountered few Latino employees at the national forest.

## Bridging Differences

Communication strategies can go a long way toward making Latinos feel more welcome.

In addition to multilingual signs and brochures, alternate communication strategies may be helpful. For example, young Latinos can be recruited to form “eco-teams” to deliver messages to site visitors, or information vans can visit sites. Drivers or team members should be bilingual and supplied with literature available in Spanish.

Latino visitors are open to being approached in English, and resource managers should not assume that Latino visitors speak only Spanish. Many speak

English as well. Chavez recommends, however that resource managers use some Spanish phrases.

Latinos place a high value on national forests, but cultural issues and misunderstandings can stand in the way of a positive experience. “People don’t realize how easy it is for visitors to get turned off,” says Chavez. But in most cases, problems can be readily addressed. “A few simple changes can make people feel more welcome.” ■

## A Conversation With Debbie Chavez

**Q** *When you talk about someone who is Latino, who exactly do you mean?*

There are many groups. Latinos are an ethnic group who can come from one of several racial groups, such as White, Native American, or African American. Some were born in the United States, whereas others immigrated. In addition, there are probably 20 different countries that could call themselves Latino by our definition.

**Q** *Do you have a handle on the differences between these various groups?*

Not really. We just don’t have enough data yet to make many distinctions, but we know there are differences between Latino groups, for example, between Latinos from Mexico and those from Central America. There are also differences within groups. We do find that most of the Latinos recreating on public lands in southern California have ties to Mexico, even if they were born in the United States, so there’s not a lot of diversity in the responses within this group to examine the between-group differences.

**Q** *Does that make it hard to make general recommendations?*

It does. I always caution that rather than taking our results as indicative of all Latinos, there may be lessons to be learned from our research. But sometimes we get results that can be generalized. For example, when we find over and over again at various sites that Latinos tend to like site development such as picnic tables, it’s probably going to hold up in other places.

**Q** *What else are you working on?*

One of my latest projects involves an effort to get more kids of all ethnicities into the woods. I led a youth day event in Los Angeles, where we had 38 kids participate in four

Deborah Chavez



*Latino couple enjoying the renovated Applewhite Picnic Area.*

different activities in the forest. We wanted to evaluate how technology affects their experiences, so we had two activities that employed technology, and two matching activities that did not. For example, there was a treasure hunt that employed geographic positioning system (GPS) devices, and another one where kids looked for things along the trail and drew pictures of them.

The activities involving technology really helped get the kids excited about being outdoors. It’s just a small first effort, but we’ve developed some guidelines and received some grant money to purchase items to develop activity caches. If a forest manager wants to have a youth day, they can just call us (951-680-1558) and we’ll send them a package with everything they need, including GPS units, the treasures, and the rest. What we ask in exchange is that they collect some information from everyone, and that comes back to us to build our database.

# Scientist Profile

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Deborah Chavez comes to forestry from a background in sociology. After completing an undergraduate degree in sociology from the University of California, Riverside in 1980, she went on to get a master's degree in sociology in 1982 and a Ph.D. in sociology in 1986.

She joined the Pacific Southwest Research Station as a research social scientist in 1989. Her work has focused on Latino recreationists, relying primarily on personal interviews and surveys to understand their needs and preferences.

Some commonly used social science research methods are not well suited for Latinos. For example, survey researchers commonly



Nancy Knap

Debbie Chavez in the field, geocaching (a popular treasure-hunting game involving GPS technology).

use the telephone, but Latinos tend to be suspicious of calls. "It really takes a lot of phone calls before you get someone who will speak to you," says Chavez. Mailed surveys provoke a similar reaction. Instead, she has

found that face-to-face interviews are the best means of collecting survey data from Latinos. But, even that can be challenging. "I've learned that if I'm approaching a group who are White, I can tell them I'm doing a survey and ask them to take part. With Latinos, I can't do that. I ask how they're doing, how their family is, what they're cooking. You have to develop a relationship with them."

Chavez has also developed techniques for conducting surveys. She has created a training manual and a 2-day training session presenting techniques to enhance response rates from Latino survey participants.

Chavez has received a number of awards, including the Forest Supervisor Award for social research in 2002, the American Recreation Coalition's Legends Award in 2006, and a Certificate of Merit for excellence in science leadership in 2008. She also served as a Centennial Congress delegate from the Pacific Southwest Research Station in 2005. ■

## Latino Recreation Patterns (from cover)

the decline may be an artifact of an older counting system that overestimated recreational visitors, but there do appear to be fewer visitors, according to Don English, a visitor use monitoring program manager with the Pacific Southwest Region of the Forest Service. Higher gas prices and societal changes such as more time spent in front of the television and playing video games also may be contributing to this trend.

Understanding changing use patterns is a critical challenge for managers as they

work to keep recreation sites appealing and useful to the diverse populations of the United States. Various research groups have attempted to document how Latinos use forests and other recreational areas, but the research is incomplete and has not yet reached many site managers. "Focusing on Latinos is still big news and unheard of for many people," says Chavez.

Another incentive for focusing on attracting Latino visitors to these and other recreational sites includes the health benefits gained through physical activity. Lack of exercise

is a problem for many Americans, regardless of their age, ethnicity, or income, and is reflected by rising levels of obesity and diabetes. Promoting parks and public lands for physical activities is one

strategy that could help counteract this trend. These areas are easily accessible and provide recreation sites for urban residents who may lack alternative spaces for recreation, such as backyards.

Although such efforts could help forest managers broaden the appeal of our natural areas, it's important to recognize that it can be difficult to generalize because Latinos are a very diverse group whose habits and attitudes differ widely. Thus, Chavez tries to be specific in her recommendations.

"Some of the studies I have conducted are site-specific and therefore cannot be generalized to other places," Chavez says. "Some of the studies cover national forests or provinces, and those results can be generalized to those broad areas. It is important to note that the broader studies still should not be generalized to Latino recreation use in other places, such as in Texas." ■



Victor Caro

Visitors to the Angeles National Forest respond to a recreation user survey.

## What's Next

Much more work remains to be done in documenting and understanding Latino use patterns in national forests. One of Chavez's first projects, in 1990, was to set up a long-term survey of Latinos' recreational use of forests.

She and her colleagues have returned to about 20 sites every 2 to 3 years, asking similar questions. She is currently reviewing the data for further analysis.

Chavez is particularly interested in looking at picnicking activities because it is a mainstay for Latino recreation. "I want to see if variables like ethnicity make a difference over time, or if the picnicking activity 18 years ago is the same as today," she says. Chavez is also interested in looking specifically at Mexican-Americans and how their recreation activities may have changed over the years.

Once fully analyzed, the data will be useful for testing assumptions. "It's a chance to look at things we (think we) know and see if they have held up over the years," says Chavez. ■

**Writer's Profile:** Jim Kling is a science writer based in Bellingham, Washington. His work has appeared in *Science* magazine, *Scientific American*, *Technology Review*, and other publications. Ecology is often an important theme in his science fiction stories, which he has published in *Nature*.



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## For Further Reading

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