



The Economic Impact of Outdoor Recreation and the Whitefish Trail in Whitefish, Montana

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to measure the economic impact of outdoor recreation and the Whitefish Trail, to understand the trail’s impact on local businesses and residents’ quality of life, and to understand how the trail fits into the bigger picture of outdoor recreation in the area. This study used a combination of trail counter data, in-person interviews, and data from a fitness tracking app, Strava.

Summary Findings

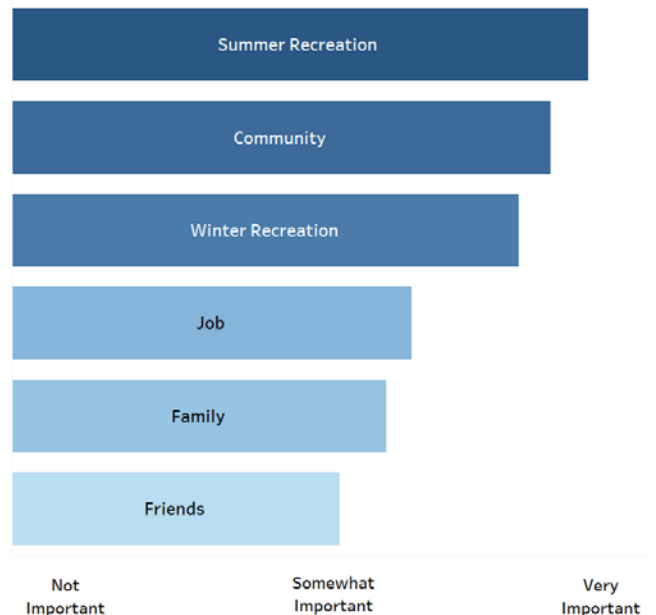
- Outdoor recreation is the most important reason why visitors come to Whitefish and why locals stay in the community.
- The Whitefish Trail contributes to \$6.4 million in annual spending by visitors who come to enjoy the trail and by locals who purchase or rent outdoor gear at local stores. Spending by visitors who use the Whitefish Trail translates to 68 additional jobs and \$1.9 million in labor income in Whitefish
- Spending by people visiting Whitefish mainly for outdoor recreation in the area amounts to approximately \$101 million in spending, 1,460 jobs and \$41.1 million in labor income annually.

Locals and Outdoor Recreation

Outdoor recreation is integral to life in Whitefish. We asked locals to rate the importance of different factors in their reason to move to or stay in Whitefish. Summer recreation is rated highest, followed by community character and winter recreation (see Figure 1).

Local trail users use the trail an average of 1.8 times per week. When local trail users were asked to identify their favorite aspects of the Whitefish Trail, the most common response is its proximity to town (44 percent), followed by well-maintained trails (39 percent). Fifty-one percent report exercising more since the Whitefish Trail was built. Local residents who report having used the Whitefish Trail during the previous year spent more than twice the amount on outdoor gear at Whitefish stores: \$1,403 for trail users versus \$660 for non-trail users. This finding supports anecdotes from local business owners that sales have increased since the Whitefish Trail opened, particularly for equipment related to mountain biking.

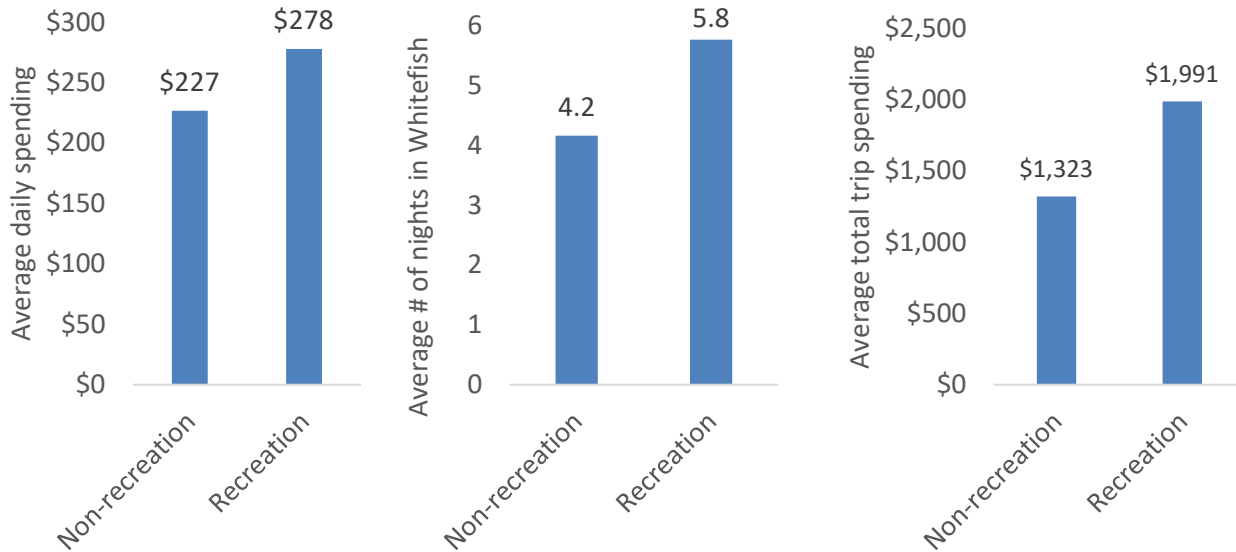
Figure 1. “Why did you move to or stay in Whitefish?”



Visitors and Outdoor Recreation

Outdoor recreation is 65 percent of visitors' primary purpose for visiting the area. Visitors whose primary purpose is outdoor recreation have significantly greater spending than those who are not in Whitefish for outdoor recreation (\$278 per day versus \$227). People visiting for outdoor recreation also tend to stay in the area longer: 5.8 days per trip compared to 4.2 days per trip. Together, longer stays and greater daily spending result in roughly \$670 more spent per trip for people visiting Whitefish for outdoor recreation.

Figure 2. Average daily spending, trip duration, and total trip spending for visitors whose primary purpose is recreation versus non-recreation.



Economic Impacts of the Whitefish Trail and Outdoor Recreation

We estimate that the Whitefish Trail contributes annually to \$6.4 million in consumer spending in the area: \$2.7 million from local residents spending on outdoor gear and \$3.6 million by visitors. Spending from visitors alone translates to 68 additional jobs and \$1.9 million in labor income in the community.

Conclusions

The Whitefish Trail is one of many outdoor recreation destinations in the area, including Glacier National Park and Whitefish Mountain Resort. While the other destinations are substantial economic engines driving much of the local economy, the Whitefish Trail also contributes meaningfully while remaining a valued asset for locals. The economic impact of the Whitefish Trail will continue to grow as the community completes their vision to protect local lands and build a 55+ mile loop trail around Whitefish Lake.

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About Headwaters Economics

Headwaters Economics is an independent, nonprofit research group that assists the public and elected officials in making informed choices about land management and community development decisions. <https://headwaterseconomics.org/>.