

Nature based sports in forest areas in France. Results from the 2015 French national survey “Forest and society”

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The French national “Forest and society” monitoring system implemented by the French forestry office (ONF) in charge of public forest management is structured around a barometer, a quantitative survey renewed every 5 years, the last one in 2015. It deals with forest recreation and social representations of forest and forest management in France. The aim is to provide ONF foresters with better skills to manage the public forests they are in charge of. Even though it is impossible to conduct interviews about recreation in public forests only, because people don't make difference between the forests according to their ownership, the results are especially significant for public forests, which concentrate the majority of visitors, infrastructure and facilities for forest recreation.

To improve the results of the barometer, every national “Forest and society” survey focuses on a specific topic. Outdoor physical activities and nature-based sports are an important part of forest recreation. With their increase and diversification, foresters are facing new challenges to manage and sometimes limit these sport practices in forested environments whereas local communities are often interested in their development as part of an eco-touristic economy. In this context, the ONF chose to focus on physical activities and nature-based sports in the 2015 Forest and society national survey. This part of the survey was implemented on a 2000 people sample representing the French population aged 15 and more.

Importance of physical activities and nature-based sports in forested environments

The first part of the questionnaire intends to investigate the rate of practice for different activities: leisure activities like walking or outdoor games, outdoor sports (hiking, biking, horse riding, running, orienteering...) but also traditional activities such as hunting or fishing (Figure 1). The answer “others” gives people the opportunity to declare specific activities e.g new ones. If the overview is known, with walking (less than 2 hours) and hiking being the dominant activities, the range of some activities does not reflect exactly the importance given by the foresters in their management or relationships with sport stakeholders: for example, almost no relationships are established with runners and runners' representative except for a few major events whereas running in the forest is in 2015 the 3rd most important sport practice. In contrast, relationships remain active with the equestrian Federation even though the relative weight of this activity historically connected to the forest is not so high.

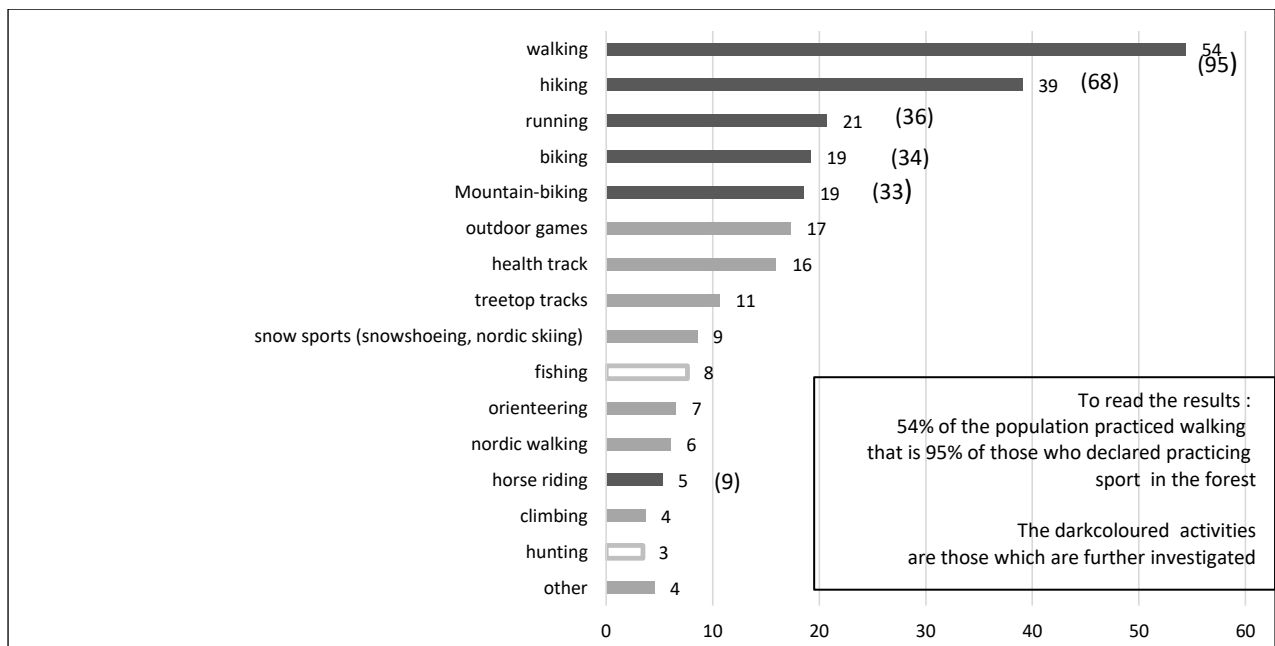


Figure 1: Rate of different sport activities practiced in French forests
 French national survey "Forest and society", ONF-UCN, 2015

Another interesting result is the number of activities per person: the majority of people practice several activities, with only 9% who declare only one activity (that is short walks for almost all the people interviewed) and more than one third who declare 5 or more physical activities, i.e. 4 or more sport activities in addition to short walks.

Specific profiles for different sport practices

In the second part of the presentation, the focus is put on the profiles of forest-sports practitioners. An important determinant is age. Young people from 15 to 34 are over-represented in a majority of sports except hiking, the only activity in which people aged 50 to 64 are over-represented, and walking that is not favoured by the youngest (15-24 years old). This generational specialization between leisure or endurance activities (i.e. short walks and hiking) and more energetic sports should be taken into account for forest recreation management, especially in urban and peri-urban forests, or tourist areas with a high number of visitors.

To complement these general features, the questionnaire focusses on the main forest nature-based sports: short walks (less than 2 hours), hiking, biking and mountain biking (grouped together), running, and horse riding. The survey analyses the profiles of practitioners in terms of frequency, sociability and reasons for practice.

The comparison between hikers and runners practicing in the forest in terms of main reason for practice (to choose between fitness, performance, connection to nature and friendliness) is a significant example. Runners give a clear priority to physical issues, fitness (60 %) and secondarily performance (20%) whereas hikers favour in a more balanced way connection to nature (39%) and fitness (35%). Friendliness (18%) is also part of the motivation for hikers who enjoy being together with family members or friends contrary to runners who practice often alone. The other criteria confirm the differences existing between the practitioners' profiles.

Nature-based sports are not a new issue for research but the forest, often considered as a symbol of nature is also a very popular recreation area in France where 87% of the population declared at least one visit to the forest in 2015. This first exploration of sport activities inside

the French national “Forest and society survey” could help the foresters to understand the place of nature in the main traditional nature-based sports, the specific needs of practitioners according to the different activities and thus to improve their recreation management skills and avoid some use conflicts.