

Fish Creek Recreation Planning

2022 Public Survey Results Summary



Overview

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is building on previous planning efforts to create an updated, comprehensive roadmap for managing recreational use on FWP managed lands in the Fish Creek Watershed. To support the development of a draft strategy for managing recreation in the area, the planning team solicited input through a public survey that was open from October to December of 2022 and received 691 responses. The survey was designed to gain a general understanding of the interests and concerns held by a range of recreational users who either visit or are interested in visiting the Fish Creek Area.

This document summarizes the public survey responses we received. While the survey results reflect a diversity of perspectives held by many kinds of recreational users, they are likely not a comprehensive record of the interests and concerns of all recreational users invested in the management of the Fish Creek Area. Survey respondents did not all indicate if they are current or prospective users, and we likely did not reach every user interested in the management of Fish Creek Area. The respondents we did reach provided helpful information, comments, and feedback that will contribute positively to the planning process as it moves forward.

The public survey was one of several opportunities for the public to provide input that will be considered when developing a strategy for managing recreation in the Fish Creek Area. More information about upcoming opportunities to engage in the process, including public meetings and opportunities to provide input, can be found on FWP's website. [Learn more here.](#)

Prepared by The Center for Natural Resources & Environmental Policy, University of Montana
January, 2023

Summary of Public Survey Results

Visitation

Survey respondents shared a range of information regarding their visitation to the Fish Creek Area, including:

- 64% reported visiting the Fish Creek area within the last six months
- 50% indicated that they visit the Fish Creek area one to five times per year.
- 44% of respondents indicate they most often visit the Fish Creek area during the Summer, while 31% indicate they most often visit in the Fall

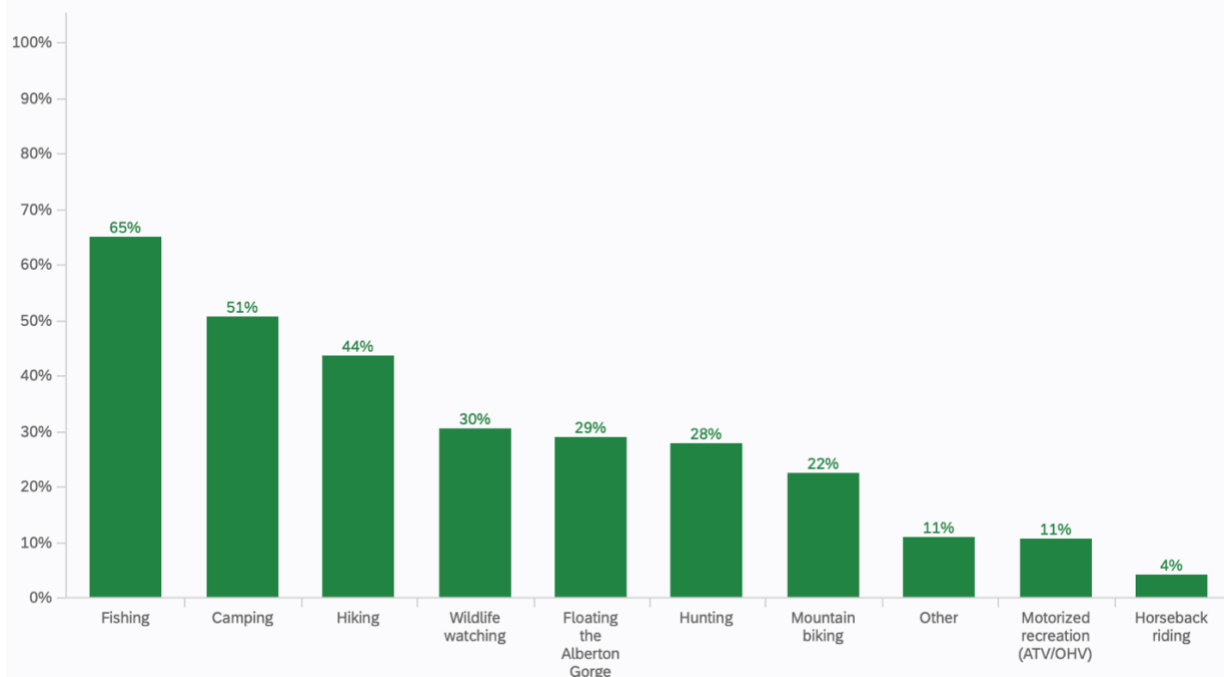
Type of Recreational Use

Survey respondents were asked to select the activity/activities they most often enjoy in the Fish Creek area. Most respondents indicated that they enjoy multiple forms of recreation in Fish Creek. Respondents indicated that they enjoy the following recreational activities in the Fish Creek area:

- 65% of respondents enjoy fishing
- 62% enjoy camping
- 44% enjoy hiking
- 30% enjoy wildlife watching
- 29% enjoy floating the Alberton Gorge
- 28% enjoy hunting
- 22% enjoy mountain biking
- 11% enjoy motorized recreation
- 4% enjoy horseback riding

Respondents were also asked to provide other activities not listed on the survey. 10% of respondents listed other activities, examples including swimming, cross-country skiing, and backcountry skiing in the Fish Creek area.

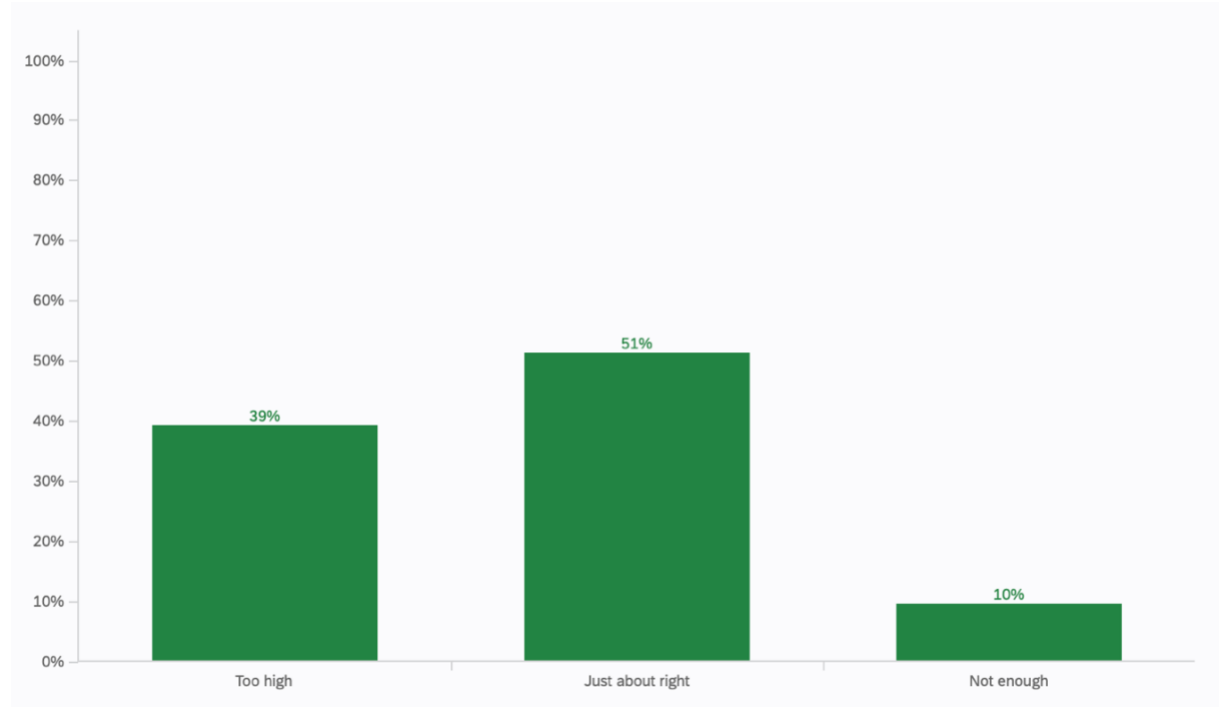
Figure 1: Percentage of respondents by recreation type most enjoyed in Fish Creek.



Current Levels of Use

51% of survey respondents indicated that the current level of visitor use in the Fish Creek area is just about right, while 39% are concerned with the current level of visitor use in the area. Several respondents noted an increase in out-of-state license plates in the Fish Creek area and their worry about the influx of out-of-state visitors. Several respondents also stated they were satisfied with the current number of visitors but did not want to see an increase.

Figure 2: Percentage of respondents by their feelings about the current level of visitor use in Fish Creek.



Most survey respondents indicated concern around at least one kind of current recreational use in the Fish Creek Area, including:

- 58% were concerned with the impacts of motorized recreation in the area
- 58% were concerned with increased visitation
- 48% were concerned with impacts from camping at dispersed camping areas
- 48% were concerned with impacts to the fishing resource
- 43% were concerned with road erosion
- 42% were concerned with impacts to wildlife and/or wildlife habitat
- 33% were concerned with conflicts between recreationists and/or recreation user types
- 24% were concerned with floating on Fish Creek
- 23% were concerned with Trail erosion
- 12% of respondents also expressed concern for a range of other impacts from recreational use, including the amount of trash and human waste left on the landscape
- 11% were concerned with impacts from non-motorized use

Camping

Most survey respondents indicated that the level of camping areas in Fish Creek is about right:

- 56% of respondents indicated that the level of developed, designated campsites is “about right”
- 50% of respondents indicated that the level of dispersed, undesignated campsites is “about right”

Many respondents also indicated that they feel there are too many or too few camping opportunities in the Fish creek area:

- 36% of respondents indicated that the level of developed/designated areas in Fish Creek is “too little”
- 37% of respondents indicated that there are “too many” dispersed/undesignated camping areas in Fish Creek

Comments regarding the current amount of developed, designated camping opportunities included suggestions that current developed camping amenities are appropriate given trends in use. Others suggested that developing additional designated camping opportunities could redirect use from dispersed camping areas and consequently reduce impacts to the area’s resources.

Comments regarding the current level of dispersed, undesignated camping included concerns around human waste and trash associated with dispersed camping, concerns around increasing impacts from dispersed camping, and suggestions that many users prefer dispersed camping over developed camping opportunities

Recreation Amenities

Survey respondents were also asked about trails, roads, and potential additional recreation amenities:

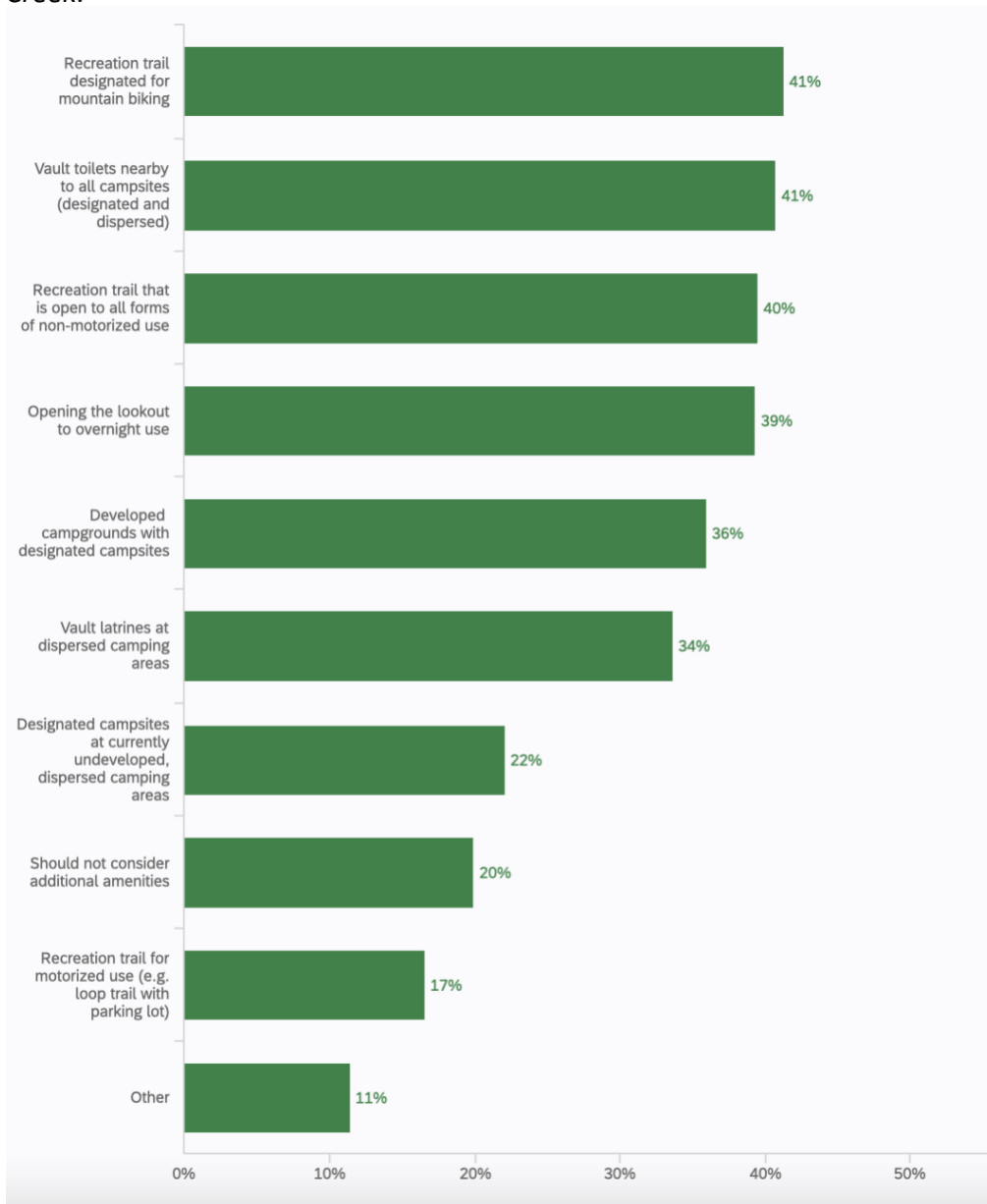
- 46% of respondents were satisfied with the current amount of developed non-motorized trails
- 70% were satisfied with the number of developed roads open to public use
- 44% of respondents indicated that there is “not enough” developed non-motorized trails in the drainage
- Respondents were split on their satisfaction regarding the number of developed motorized trails, with 43% indicating the amount was “about right” and 41% indicating that there are “too many” developed motorized trails in the drainage.

When asked about potential additional amenities FWP might consider adding, roughly 40% of respondents shared they would like to see additional mountain biking trails, vault toilets nearby campsites, a recreation trail that is open to all forms of non-motorized use added to the drainage, and the Williams Peak Lookout opened to overnight use. 36% of respondents would

like additional developed, designated camping opportunities and 34% would like toilets to be added in dispersed camping areas. 22% of respondents would like to see designated campsites in areas that are currently being used for dispersed camping. 17% of respondents are interested in the seeing an additional trail for motorized use added to the drainage. Respondents also suggested designating specific trails only for equestrians and hiking, adding bear boxes and garbage bins to reduce waste left in the drainage, and providing more signage on responsible recreation and the area’s cultural history.

20% of respondents also shared that they would not like to see additional recreation amenities added to the drainage. Many respondents also indicated their concern around increased use if too many recreational amenities are developed in the drainage.

Figure 3: Potential amenity by percentage of respondents who would like to see it added to Fish Creek.



Potential Management Actions

When asked about potential specific management actions that had been mentioned by stakeholders previously in the planning process, responses indicated that:

- 82% of survey respondents would support a float closure on Fish Creek to prevent the removal of woody debris that is critical for fish habitat
- 61% of respondents would support additional seasonal closures in areas to protect winter range for wildlife in the Wildlife Management Area
- 48% of respondents would support closing additional roads beyond what are currently closed

Respondents' comments on why they support additional management actions to protect habitat in the Fish Creek Area included concerns around recreational impacts to fishery health and wildlife populations, the importance of Fish Creek as key bull trout and cutthroat trout habitat, and the impacts of motorized recreation on wildlife, especially in the winter. Others responded that they are concerned around limiting access to recreational users and underscored the need to not limit access in areas where there are minimal impacts on wildlife and/or fishery health due to recreational use.

General Comments

Survey respondents offered general comments at the end of the survey regarding recreation management in the Fish Creek Area. Many comments included suggestions that the current level of use is appropriate with the caveat that additional pressure could lead to unacceptable impacts on wildlife, fishery habitat, and recreational opportunities. Many comments also revolved around limiting development and not inviting additional recreational pressure. Several comments suggested that Fish Creek should be “left alone” and not improved.

For some respondents, the development of additional recreational amenities was appropriate if balanced with measures to protect wildlife and fishery health. For example, several respondents suggested balancing any new motorized or mountain bike opportunities with seasonal and/or area closures for wildlife. Many respondents advocated generally for additional recreation opportunities including mountain biking trails, new motorized recreation opportunities, and expanded camping amenities.

Many participants shared the concern that recreation is increasing and suggested that something should be done to curtail its impacts. Suggestions for limiting the impacts of expanding recreational use included clearer signage, enforcement, and education, as well as developing existing camping amenities to concentrate use.

A large number of comments also emphasized the importance of Fish Creek to respondents as a special place for solitude, recreation, gathering with family and friends, generating economic benefit for the area, and for the conservation of fish, wildlife, and natural resources.