

Recreation Resources of Sussex County



Photo by Donna Traylor

Kayaking on Wallkill River

Definition of Recreation: “Physical activity through casual or organized participation, often requiring physical effort or skill, for the purpose of enjoyment, expressing or improving physical fitness or mental well-being, forming social relationships, or obtaining results in competition at all levels.”¹

If all adults met very modest levels of physical activity, estimated cost savings to the U.S. would be \$76.6 billion annually.

~The Physician and Sportsmedicine Magazine, October 2001

Providing recreational opportunities is one of the most significant ways in which government can contribute to the health and welfare of its citizens. According to the President’s Council on Physical Fitness, regular physical activity improves health in the following ways:

- Reduces the risk of dying prematurely, heart disease, developing diabetes, high blood pressure, colon cancer, depression and anxiety.
- Helps control weight and build and maintain healthy bones, muscles and joints.
- Promotes psychological well-being.²

Providing land for the purpose of recreation also contributes to the overall quality of life in a community. There are a myriad of community benefits associated with access to open space and recreation areas.

- Aesthetics - green areas and parkland reduce the sometimes cluttered effect on the landscape that development can have. The “visual” environment will become increasingly important as Sussex County pursues its goal to become a four-seasons destination for tourism.

- Increased land and home values - numerous studies have demonstrated a correlation between increased real estate values and parkland.

Facility Based Recreation

Facility based recreation requires capital improvements for fields, gyms, courts, courses and other facilities needed to participate in the recreational activity. This type of recreation is most often provided through structured programs. The vast majority of public recreation programs serve youth. Nearly 40% of Sussex County households include families with children under 18 years of age.³ Recreation facilities are provided by public agencies supported by federal, state, and local tax dollars. Private enterprises also supply recreational opportunities. On a more limited basis organized recreation serves other age groups.

Public Facilities

Municipalities and school districts in Sussex County provide and maintain a broad array of recreation facilities. The facilities are utilized by school athletic programs, municipal athletic programs, and private organizations such as Little League, softball and soccer clubs.

A complete list, by municipality, of all publicly owned or leased recreation facilities in Sussex County, as well as a breakdown of the type of recreation opportunities available at each location is provided in **Table 1: Municipal Recreation Facilities in Sussex County**.

Athletic Fields

There are 254 existing athletic fields in Sussex County that are utilized by municipalities and school districts. An in-depth look at existing athletic fields versus population in the county is provided in **Table 2: Existing Athletic Fields Per 1000 Population** and presented graphically on **Map 25: Existing Recreation Field Statistics in Sussex County**.

The county average is almost 2 (1.76) fields per one thousand of population. There are five communities in Sussex County that have less than one (1) athletic field per one thousand residents: Branchville Borough, Walpack Township, Montague Township, Hopatcong Borough, Vernon Township, and Stillwater Township. It should be noted however, that there is an athletic field in Branchville Borough that is not owned or leased by the municipality, and it is not counted in these statistics.

Thirty two percent (45,727) of Sussex County residents reside in these five communities with the bulk in Vernon Township (population 24,686) and Hopatcong Borough (population 15,888).

This data was also analyzed on a *regional* basis. A regional population-based analysis of athletics fields in Sussex County is provided in **Table 3: Existing Athletic Fields per**

1000 Population – Regionalized by High School Sending Districts. This table analyzes the data based on high school sending districts due to the large number of athletic fields provided by most high school facilities.

Based on this “regionalization” of the data, Sussex residents in all but two towns enjoy at least the county average of 1.76 athletic fields per 1000 of population. The two towns that have less than 1 athletic field per 1000 of population are Hopatcong Borough (Hopatcong High School), and Vernon Township (Vernon High School).

All of the communities report that their facilities are handicap accessible; however many of the older facilities are not necessarily compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). **Table 1: Municipal Recreation Facilities in Sussex County** lists the communities that have paved walking paths that are suitable for wheel chair access.

Public Programs

Most of the youth sport programs are either school teams or are run by private clubs such as Little League or soccer clubs, although there are some municipal recreation programs that offer basketball or swim team opportunities. The majority of the municipal recreation programs also offer summer and holiday activities. Some offer movies and intermediate school dances. There are no municipal recreation programs specifically geared to the disabled population or children with special needs.

The 4-H program in Sussex is coordinated by the Rutgers Cooperative Extension. This is a thriving program that involves children in a wide variety of activities including but not limited to recreation, cooking, arts and craft, science and agriculture and livestock activities. The program in Sussex operates over 70 separate clubs. Children in grades 4 – 13 are eligible for 4-H club. Grades 1 – 3 are eligible for 4-H prep club.

Private Facilities

Sussex County is home to a large number of private business enterprises operating recreation facilities. These facilities contribute to Sussex County’s viability as a destination for tourism. An inventory of specific facilities is located in **Appendix A: Private Recreation Facilities by Activity.**

Camping

In 2001 Sussex campgrounds provided 1,015 of the 13,031 campsites in New Jersey (8%).⁴ There are at least 24 campgrounds currently operating in Sussex County (for a complete list, see **Appendix A**).

Golf

“If you watch a game, it’s fun. If you play it, it’s recreation. If you work at it, it’s golf.”
Bob Hope⁵

In 1992, a group of local developers proposed the concept of a 'Golf Preserve' in Sussex County. The concept was to develop additional public and private golf courses and promote Sussex County as a destination resort for golf. The Golf Preserve would strengthen the tourism industry and provide economic growth in the county. The Golf Preserve concept was endorsed by both the Sussex County Planning Board and the County Board of Chosen Freeholders, by resolution, in 1992. Since then, the sport has grown in the county.

There are now eighteen golf courses located in Sussex County. Of these, three are private, two are semi-private and the rest are open to the public (for a complete list, see **Appendix A**).

Sussex County is considered the most accessible county in New Jersey in terms of golf, based on the fact that it has the lowest ratio of residents to public holes of golf in the state.⁶

The variety of golf courses provided in the county ensures a golfing experience suitable for all segments of the population, regardless of age, location or skill level. Several courses have been tagged best in New Jersey. For a list of the golf courses and a description of some of the services and amenities available at some of the golf courses in Sussex County, see **Appendix A**.

Horseback riding and stables

There are at least 26 stables located in Sussex County. Many are open to the public and offer lessons in English and Western riding as well as guided trail riding.

Skiing

There are two downhill skiing facilities in Sussex County - Mountain Creek (formerly Vernon Valley/Great Gorge) and Hidden Valley. Both are located in Vernon Township. These facilities together include 57 trails and cover over 200 acres. Both facilities are lighted for nighttime skiing. For a more complete description, see **Appendix A**.

Other Private Recreation Facilities

- Skydiving and Parachuting: There are three private businesses that facilitate this sport in Sussex County.
- Tennis: There are at least two privately operated indoor tennis facilities in Sussex County.
- Skeet shooting: There is one skeet shooting facility in Sussex County in Wantage.
- Stadium: Skylands Stadium is located in the Augusta section of Frankford Township and is home to the New Jersey Cardinals Minor League baseball team.

Youth Camps

There are at least 10 camps in Sussex County that provide day camp or sleep away camp experiences for youth. These camps occupy more than **3,500 acres** in Sussex County. At

least one, the 910-acre Camp Allamuchy occupies land that is permanently preserved, due to a conservation and preservation easement owned by the state. For a list and description of these camps, see **Appendix A**.

Resource-based Recreation

*“Sweet recreation barred, what doth ensue
But moody and dull melancholy,
Kinsman to grim and comfortless despair.”⁷
~ William Shakespeare*

Resource-based recreation requires minimal capital improvements and depends on healthy land and water resources for recreational activities such as hiking, hunting, fishing, canoeing, bird watching, and the like. More than 30% of the land in Sussex County is preserved state or federal land, providing enormous opportunity for this type of activity.

Hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, bird watching and canoeing on public lands and waterways are just a few of the activities that make Sussex County an important destination for people who enjoy outdoor, resource based recreation. For a complete description of all recreational facilities and activities occurring on Federal and State land please see **Table 4: Sussex County Resource Based Recreation Facilities**.

In addition, rail corridors play an important role in resource-based recreation in Sussex County. Several abandoned rail beds have already become official rail-trails. **Map 26: Rail Corridors in Sussex County** shows the general location of all active and abandoned rail corridors, as well as established rail trails.

Trails

Appalachian National Scenic Trail (AT)

The Appalachian National Scenic Trail, also known as the Appalachian Trail or “AT,” traverses the ridges and valleys of the Appalachian range from Mount Katahdin, Maine to Springer Mountain, Georgia.

The trail was the “brainchild” of a forester and self taught planner named Benton MacKaye who envisioned a trail along the ridgecrests of the Appalachian Mountain chain from New England to the deep south.⁸

MacKaye proposed the trail as “a project to develop the opportunities – for recreation, recuperation, and employment – in the region of the Appalachian skyline”.⁹ His proposal appeared in an article entitled *An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning*, published in 1921 in the Journal of the American Institute of Architects. MacKaye wrote of a series of recreational communities throughout the Appalachian Mountain chain, to be

connected by a walking trail and described its purpose: “to establish a base for more extensive and systematic development of outdoors community life”.¹⁰

At the opening of a two-mile stretch of trail near Sugarloaf, Maine, on August 14th, 1937 the Appalachian Trail became a continuous foot path 2,168 miles long from Maine to Georgia. In 1968 the National Trail Systems Act was signed, largely as a result of lobbying by the Appalachian Trail Conference (ATC). The Act provided for a series of “National Scenic Trails” within the national park and forest systems. The AT was the first trail designated under the Act.¹¹

Use of the trail is limited to hiking only. The New Jersey section of the trail is 72.4 miles long. South-bonders on the trail will find that the trail enters the state just east of Sussex County’s northeastern border and immediately passes through Wawayanda State Park.

A recent and very popular addition to this area of the AT is the Pochuck Quagmire Bridge and Boardwalk in Vernon Twp. This section of the trail provides safe access from Pochuck Mountain to Wawayanda Mountain. It is the result of a collaborative effort between ATC, federal, state, and local governments, private organizations and volunteers. The 110 ft. Pochuck Quagmire Suspension Bridge spans the Pochuck Creek in the center of an approximate one-mile length of boardwalk which spans the Pochuck Creek wetlands and floodplain.

Proceeding along the County’s northerly border the trail passes through the northern tip of the Wallkill River National Wildlife Refuge. In this area the trail briefly crosses the state line, entering Warwick, New York for about three tenths of a mile, before crossing back into Sussex County. This entire length of trail, from the New York border to the Wallkill, is managed by Wawayanda State Park.

From the Wallkill area the trail continues northwesterly into High Point State Park. At High Point the trail turns southwesterly, following the Kittatinny Ridge southerly through Stokes State Forest and the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area. The trail leaves Sussex County at Walpack Township, heading for the Delaware Water Gap where it exits the state heading southwesterly into Pennsylvania. ATC describes the Kittatinny portion of the trail as “rugged and more remote than one might expect given the proximity to population centers, with abundant wildlife and an active bear population”.¹²

From Wallkill to High Point the trail is managed by High Point State Park. As it leaves High Point, the trail is managed by the units it traverses namely, Stokes State Forest and Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area.

There are seven shelters for backpackers along the section of the trail that traverses Sussex County, as follows:¹³

Appalachian Trail Shelters in Sussex County			
Shelter Name	Miles from NY State line	Shelter Name	Miles from NY State line
Wawayanda	4	Pochuck Mountain	17
High Point	29.4	Rutherford	33.6
Mashipacong	36.6	Gren Anderson	42.3
Brink Road	49.1		

Liberty Water Gap Trail

The Liberty Water Gap Trail links a number of existing trails to create a 156 mile walking path across the State of New Jersey from Liberty State Park in Jersey City to the Delaware Water Gap. According to Al Kent of the Liberty Water Gap Trail Committee, the trail is 80 percent complete. The trail connects the Hudson Riverfront Walkway in Hudson County, the Lenape Trail in Essex County, the Patriots Path in Morris County, the Sussex Branch Trail and the Paulinskill Valley Trail in Sussex County.

On most of this trail, hiking, biking, horseback riding and cross-country skiing are permitted. However this is a system of interconnected trails. Some sections are more conducive to certain activities than others, and local rules apply concerning trail use.

The only disconnected portion of the Liberty Water Gap Trail in Sussex County is on the Sussex Branch Trail where the trail ends at Newton and continues again on the other side of town. The Liberty Water Gap Trail also still lacks a connection in Warren County from the Paulinskill Valley Trail to the Delaware Water Gap. Original plans to use a portion of the Appalachian Trail for this purpose have been put on hold due to the ATC's concerns regarding existing overuse of this section of the AT.

Highlands Trail

This trail is a cooperative effort of the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference, and various conservation organizations, state and local governments, and local businesses. It is a work in progress. "When it is complete it will extend over 150 miles from Storm King Mountain on the Hudson River in New York south to Phillipsburg, New Jersey, on the Delaware River."¹⁴ The trail plan uses a combination of co-alignment on existing trails, new trails and road walking. Camping is not permitted on this trail. Also fires, horses, bikes, motorized vehicles are prohibited unless specifically allowed by local regulations.

The Sussex County portion of the trail begins when it leaves Jefferson Township in Morris County between Routes 15 and 181 and enters Sparta Township. The trail is established from there to Lake Lackawanna in Byram Township. None of this portion of

the trail is preserved however, and much of it exists on private property and is revocable.¹⁵

The next portion of the trail in Sussex County is not yet established. As planned, the trail will cross Byram Township municipal property and private property owned by Wild West City. A street walk will then connect the trail to the existing trails in Allamuchy Mountain State Park, and the Morris Canal Greenway at Waterloo Village where it will leave Sussex County.

Sussex Branch Trail

Built on the rail bed of the former Sussex Branch line of the Erie Lackawanna Railroad, the Sussex Branch Trail traverses 21 miles through farmland, forest and towns in Sussex County. The railroad was a mule driven operation built in 1848 to haul ore from the Andover Iron Mine to the Morris Canal at Waterloo Village. During the latter 1800's rail was extended to Newton and then to Branchville. In the 1960's the rail between Andover Junction and Newton was removed. By 1977 the Sussex Branch line had come to an end and in 1982 the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection purchased the abandoned line from Waterloo Road to Branchville as a rail trail.¹⁶ It is now managed by Kittatinny Valley State Park and is used for walking, horseback riding, cross country skiing and mountain biking and is wheelchair accessible.

The trail leaves Waterloo Village near Waterloo Road in Byram Township, passes the west side of Jefferson Lake, heads northwesterly to Cranberry Lake, through Kittatinny Valley State Park in Andover. It continues on to Newton, where the trail is interrupted. The trail starts again on the other side of Newton and continues on to Warbasse Junction in Lafayette Township. In Warbasse Junction the Sussex Branch Trail intersects the Paulinskill Valley Trail.

Paulinskill Valley Trail

The Paulinskill Valley Trail follows the route of the old New York, Susquehanna & Western Railroad. The trail extends 27 miles from Sparta Junction in Sussex County to Knowlton Township in Warren County, and crosses the Paulinskill River several times. The rails have been removed, and the trail has a packed cinder base. Remains of the former railroad stations can be found in many places.¹⁷

The trail is managed by Kittatinny Valley State Park and is used for walking, horseback riding, cross country skiing and mountain biking and is wheelchair accessible. There is also a Paulinskill Valley Trail Committee, which offers slide presentations about the Trail's ecology and history.¹⁸

Trail Systems in State and Federally owned Facilities

There are approximately 150 miles of recognized and officially sanctioned trails on state and federally managed lands in Sussex County. Most are blazed and are for non-motorized use only. **Table 5: Sussex County Trails on State and Federally Owned**

Facilities provides a detailed list of trails within state and federal facilities in Sussex County (unofficial trails are not listed).

Fishing

The state of New Jersey requires that a fishing license be worn by all persons age 16 or older fishing freshwater in New Jersey - this includes privately owned lakes and waters. Trout stamps are also required when fishing trout stocked waters. A list of private licensing agents for fishing and hunting in Sussex County can be found in **Appendix B**.

It is estimated that there are 8,600 miles of freshwater streams in New Jersey.¹⁹ However, only a small portion of those are accessible to the public. New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife (NJDFW) estimates that there are approximately **52.1 miles** of publicly owned streams open to angling in Sussex County. The Division developed a list of stream stretches that are publicly owned and open to the general angler. The list describes the major gamefish and panfish population present as well as the recreational facilities available. Please see **Table 6: Sussex County Stream Reaches Accessible and Open to the Public**.

According to the New Jersey Division of Fish & Wildlife (NJDFW), there are over 4,100 freshwater lakes, ponds, impoundments and reservoirs, one acre or greater in New Jersey. These water bodies cover over 61,000 acres. Most of them however, are privately owned, and public access is denied.

NJDFW estimates that there are **5,023 acres** of publicly owned lakes, ponds and reservoirs in Sussex County that are open to anglers. The Division developed a list of waters designed to “assist fishermen in finding a place to fish.” They describe the list as not 100% complete, and acknowledge that conditions change constantly. The list includes only “those waters where a good population of desirable species of worthwhile size exists, and where public access is assured”.²⁰ Please see **Table 7: Sussex County Publicly Owned Ponds and Lakes Open to Anglers**.

There are a number of facilities in Sussex County that provide accessible fishing sites for people with disabilities. For a complete listing of these facilities please see **Appendix B**.

In spring 2003, the State of New Jersey Division of Fish & Wildlife (NJDFW) stocked 575,000 trout in New Jersey waterways.²¹ In addition, NJDFW administers several programs designed to introduce the public to the sport, encourage participation and increase the fun. For a description of some of these programs, see **Appendix B**.

Hunting

There are 118 Wildlife Management Areas (WMA's) encompassing more than 276,000 acres in New Jersey.²² These areas are managed as habitats for hunting. Twelve of these WMA's occupy 13,775 acres in Sussex County. Additionally hunting is allowed in most State Parks.

New Jersey requires a hunting license for all hunters. For those who have never had a hunting or trapping license, a hunter education course is required in order to purchase a license. Students age 10 to 15 years are issued a free youth license upon completion of the course. Youths, ages 10 – 13 must be accompanied by a licensed adult age 21 or older, in order to hunt in New Jersey. Hunters who lose their hunting license and have never taken a hunter education course must also take one of the courses. There are four hunting courses offered by NJDFW: Shotgun, Bow and Arrow, Rifle / Muzzleloader, Trapper Training. Advanced hunter education courses are also offered for those looking to improve their skills.

New Jersey offers more than one hundred days of deer hunting, including seasons for bow, shotgun, and muzzleloading rifle. Most zones allow multiple bag limits.

The Flatbrook–Roy WMA on Route 615 in Layton, Sandyston Township operates a shooting range/hunter training area for shotgun, archery and muzzleloader (75 yards) target practice.

According to NJDFW, “Deer are photographed, watched and hunted by many New Jerseyans and visitors from elsewhere. Deer hunters spend more than 100 million dollars each year as they enjoy approximately 1.5 million recreation-days hunting deer. Money spent in the course of deer hunting benefits a wide variety of New Jersey businesses”.²³

The NJDFW stocks Wildlife Management Areas in New Jersey each year with 55,000 pheasants produced on the Rockport Pheasant Farm.²⁴ In addition, the NJDFW sponsors programs such as Outstanding White-tailed Deer Program, Hunters Helping the Hungry, and Outstanding Gobbler Award Program. These are more fully described in **Appendix B**.

Birding/Wildlife Watching

According to the 2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, 1.9 million people spent time watching New Jersey’s wildlife in 2001. Approximately 688,000 people watched wildlife more than one mile from their homes and 225,000 of these watchers were not state residents.²⁵ Participants spent 1.2 billion dollars in the state on wildlife watching activities and related trip expense.²⁶ Another notable statistic derived from the survey:

- New Jersey is one of only 7 states in which wildlife watchers outspend hunters and anglers. In total, NJ wildlife watchers, hunters and anglers contributed \$2.2 billion to the local economy.²⁷

Members of the Sussex County Bird Club report that some Important Bird Areas (IBA’s) in Sussex County are:

- Kittatinny Ridge during the fall & spring migration.
- Old Mine Road Area
- Hyper Humus site in Hampton and Lafayette Townships²⁸

Cross Country Skiing

Fairview Lake Cross-Country and High Point Cross Country are major resource based recreational facilities that focus entirely on cross-country skiing. The facilities are fully described in **Appendix A**.

Recreation Trends

The public's interest in outdoor recreation activity continues to grow and change as evidenced by the following trends.

- A 2001 national survey of American adults shows a broad increase in outdoor recreation participation. Twenty of 37 tracked activities registered an increase in the percentage of Americans participating over the past 12 months. The sharpest climbs in reported participation were in wildlife viewing, hiking, running/jogging and motor boating.²⁹
- A study last year by the Outdoor Recreation Coalition of America revealed that hikers aged 45 and over far outnumber those between the ages of 25 and 34. By 2005, hiking, road biking, and perhaps even mountain biking will be dominated by middle-aged men and women, according to studies by the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association of America.³⁰
- Participation in ultramarathons - races ranging from 30 to 100-plus miles - has increased six to eight percent a year for the last decade. This increase is partly due to races being moved from hard roads to hiking and biking trails whose softer surfaces are easier on runners' knees and where surroundings can be peaceful and relaxing.³¹
- Eighty-eight percent of parents believe that participating in outdoor activities strengthens family relationships according to an REI national survey of parents with children ages 4 to 14. Parents ranked camping as the number one "great outdoor family experience" (33%), followed by hiking (14.5%), bicycling (13.3%), and fishing (12.8%).³²

While there is little statistical data available on resource-based recreation trends specifically related to Sussex County, national trends referenced previously are often a good indicator, with some exceptions:

- While the number of wildlife watchers has declined slightly nationally, the numbers in New Jersey continue to soar. New Jersey wildlife watchers spent \$652 per person in 2001, compared to the national average of \$510.³³
- Total dollars spent by wildlife watchers in New Jersey grew 43% (from \$864 million) in 5 years time.³⁴

Hunting has experienced a decrease nationwide, according to U.S. Fish and Wildlife's Survey. From 1996 to 2001, the number of hunters declined nationally by 7%, with an associated 12% drop in hunting related expenditures. Sussex County sportsmen however, may be bucking the trend:

- As reported by U.S. Fish and Wildlife, the annual deer harvest in Sussex rose 19% from 1995 (7,047 harvested) to 1999 (8,401 harvested).³⁵ This would seem to indicate an increase in hunting activities in the county. This increase however,

could be related to an increase in bag limits, as opposed to an increase in the actual number of hunters

In a meeting held in March 2003 as part of the open space planning process, state and federal resource managers reported the following trends they have observed in Sussex County:

- Increased usage of Sussex County's natural lands.
- Increased encroachment on trails and facilities by off-road motorized vehicles.
- Increases in the following activities: Kayaking, birding, wildlife observation, picnicking and day use, carriage riding, day hiking.

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