



## 2023 Chaffee Recreation Re-Survey - Results Summary

### Executive Summary

Tourism in Chaffee County was growing twice as fast as the rest of Colorado before the pandemic — and then public lands visitation spiked by as much as 50%. The Chaffee Recreation Council facilitated the 2023 Recreation Re-Survey to understand current trends and track any change since the first survey in 2020.

The most-recent survey had 1,248 respondents engaged in diverse recreation types — 60% from Chaffee County, 40% from other places. An analysis of numerical responses to 15 questions, plus 4,200 write-in comments shows that user experience quality and perceived natural resource health remain the same despite a spike in outdoor use. Residents are starting to see improvements in some areas of outdoor recreation management. However, that management has not yet been sufficient to change downward trends in perceived experience quality or natural resource health.

The 2023 survey data indicates the following:

- **User experience quality remains roughly the same as in 2020.** About half of respondents see improving quality, especially related to near-town assets such as trails and the river corridor, while the other half says their experiences have degraded due to a sense of too many people or overuse, increasing trash/human waste, poor user behaviors and user conflicts with ATVs. Respondents engaged in biking, water sports and trail use have the most improved experiences, while those engaged in backpacking, mountaineering and hunting report the most degraded experiences. Residents have a less favorable view than visitors.
- Users are more intensely affected by the increased presence of others in the outdoors, and conflicts among all recreation user types are up from 2020.
- **Recreation management is starting to improve, according to 48% of all respondent and 55% of residents.** Top positive changes include better collective action (planning, cleanup, presence and signage), improving camping management and improved near-town trails.
- **Perceived natural resource health (forests, waters, wildlife and working landscapes) continue to decline for a majority of respondents. The same as in the 2020 survey, 65% of respondents perceive degradation while 35% see improvement.** Residents are much more likely to notice decline, with 72% of residents saying environmental health has degraded compared to 62% of visitors from Colorado and 38% of visitors from other states.
- **Top observed natural resource health changes are consistent with 2020 results:** Damage from high recreation use or “overuse” and a sense of natural areas being “trampled” or “trashed.” This includes damaged roads/trails, denudation (vegetation damage) related to dispersed camping and OHV use; trash and human/dog waste; and declining wildlife sightings. Top reasons for those perceiving natural resource health improvements have shifted from a 2020 focus on river and near-town infrastructure projects to also include cleaner dispersed campsites, portable toilets and the removal of beetle-kill trees through forest health improvement projects.



- Respondents note similar management shortfalls to those in 2020, involving insufficient human resources and infrastructure to keep up with growth and its impacts.
- Respondents would like to see more management at dispersed camping areas; more enforcement; more restrictions and fees to manage environmental degradation and user conflicts; management that prioritizes natural resource and wilderness protections; trail system maintenance; and more waste and trash disposal options.

## Detailed Survey Results

### Experience Quality Trend – Improved for Half and Degraded for Half

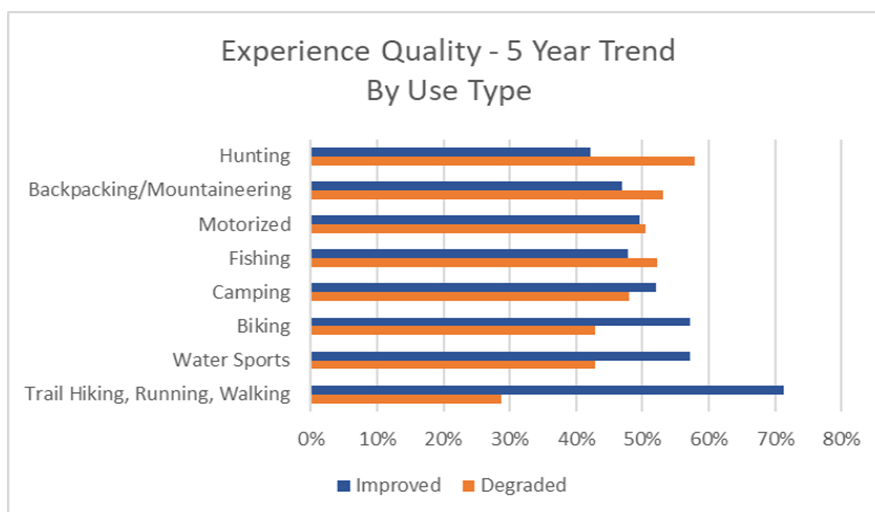
Exceptional outdoor recreation opportunities in Chaffee County encompasses the most-rafted river in America, a fifth of the state’s 14ers, diverse motorized opportunities, hunting, Gold Medal fishing, skiing, mountain hiking, river parks, the Colorado Trail and much more.

A Chaffee Rec Plan goal is to improve the number of respondents who say the quality of their experience is improving versus declining from the 2020 survey when 58% said improved. Survey results show that the ratios have stayed about the same, with 53% of respondents saying experience quality has somewhat to greatly improved compared to 47% who say it has somewhat to greatly declined.



A slight majority of residents have experienced a decline while the majority of visitors – especially those from out of state — report improvement, as shown on the graph at left.

Respondents engaged in biking, water sports and trail use have the most improved experiences, while those engaged in hunting, backpacking Mountaineering and fishing report the most degraded experiences.





For those whose **experiences have improved**, the top factors are consistent with 2020 results:

- Improved mountain bike trails, town trails, near town trail maintenance and signage (49%);
- Improved town amenities such as courts, skate and river parks, restaurants, shops (12%); and
- Improved river access quality and river parks (10%).

Typical comments: “Better and more mountain biking trails,” “Pickleball courts are great!” “Disc golf course at Vandever is awesome,” “AHRA has done a great job...with improvements at boat ramps and campgrounds” and “better town trails and river features.”

For those whose **experiences have degraded**, the top factors are also consistent with 2020 results:

- A sense of too many people, overuse and loss of solitude (61%);
- Trash, human waste, and impacts from camping (44%);
- Poor user behaviors (19%) including disrespect for the land, illegal behavior and loose dogs; and
- Impacts from “motorized” use such as road damage, noise, off-roading and speeding (12%).

Typical comments include: “Public lands in Chaffee have been inundated with recreators. The remote experience I look for is gone now. The solitude is lost,” “It feels like we’re over capacity with the amount of tourists who come here,” “Degraded roads, erosion, trash, dog waste, too many users and extreme concern for human-caused wildfires” and “OHVs flying down roads.”

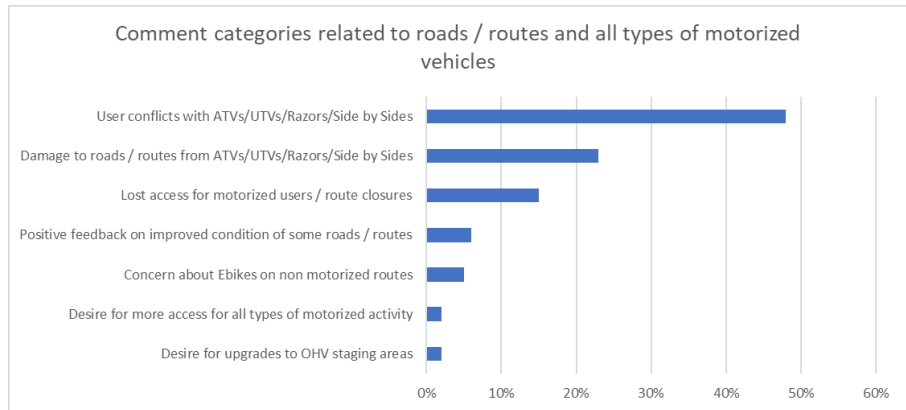
Survey respondents are in agreement (61%) that the increase in outdoor visitation since 2020 means, in short form: “Too Many People!” This perspective was noted in the first survey, but the frequency and intensity of comments demonstrates a marked change. Respondents expressed that too many people lessen the value of their experiences. The theme threads itself into answers to many of the 11 questions, evoking some feelings of sadness for lost solitude, avoidance (not going out on weekend days), and grief (for local areas no longer enjoyed or visited). Many respondents asked for more enforcement of existing rules and some suggested limits or fees to help pay for management and/or reduce the number of users.

Comments include: “Quit wasting time educating, applicable penalties are swift education;” “I think user fees would go a long way to supporting the infrastructure required for all the visitors;” “Charge for parking or some kind of permit in remote/wilderness areas to encourage less intense use and carpooling, etc.,” “More regulated fees and permits for 14er hiking and dispersed camping to prevent overcrowding and damage to landscape.” In comparison, <1% advocated for less regulation or lamented past changes in regulation such as route closures.

To better understand feedback related to “motorized” use, which includes many different activities, 111 comments related to roads, routes, and all forms of motorized use were sorted into categories of similar responses, as shown in the graph below. Results indicate themes related to use by the class of vehicles including ATVs, Razors, Side-by-Sides and UTVs (classified as “ATVS’ below).



First, **48% of comments indicate** the increased use of “ATVs” combined with behaviors described as “rude,” “aggressive” and “irresponsible” is creating **conflicts with other user types**, including with 4x4ers, motorcyclists, bikers and hikers. Comments for example include: “Lots more people, less trail courtesy. Back in the 60s and 70s Jeeps,



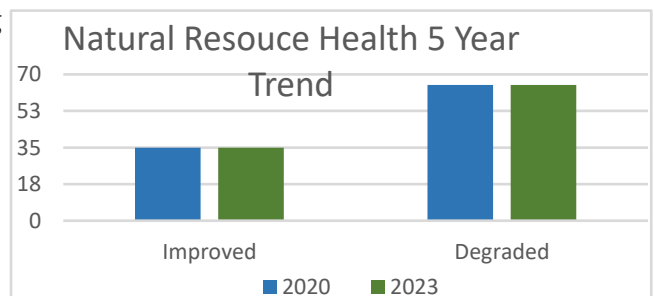
Broncos, Blazer and Scouts all shared the trails with motorcycles. Now, ATV's, Side by sides, etc. seem to think they are the only ones that can use trails. Not all users are this way, but enough to create frustrations;” and “Conflicts are terrible, especially due to new moto-play speed, kick up a bunch of dust with no consideration for other people and wildlife.”

Second, **23% of comments are related to damage** that increasing use by “ATVs” is causing to four-wheel-drive roads. This is a kind of user conflict, where other user types say they can no longer use routes for their preferred form of recreation: “Many 4x4 roads have been destroyed by overuse and razors. No skill or brain is required to drive one. There are roads that, 10 years ago, you could drive in a stock 4x4 and now you need a high-end rock crawler.” Additional comments about damage: “Side by Side vehicles are tearing up the trails. I am an offroad motorcycle rider;” and “High speed ATV's displace much soil and result in erosion resulting in rockier trails.”

Third, **15% of comments are related to frustration that roads / routes have been closed** to motorized activity in past years: “We used to enjoy an OHV ride from Mushroom Gulch to the northern edge of Salida for lunch. That access has been closed.”

### Natural Resource Quality Trend – Majority Perceive Continued Degradation

Survey results indicate continued great concern about the impacts of recreation growth to natural resources. Healthy forests, waters and wildlife are the top factor that all recreation user groups most value about where they recreate in Chaffee, according to the 2020 survey. When asked **how the quality of Chaffee County natural resources** (water, wildlife, forests, and agricultural landscapes) **have changed over the past 5 years**, 65% of respondents perceive degradation and 35% see improvement, exactly the same result as in 2020, as shown in the graph.

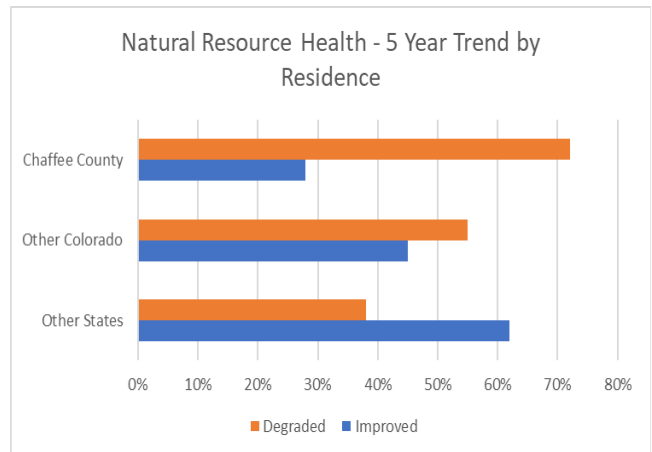




Perception of natural resource trends vary greatly between residents and visitors. 72% of residents see the health as degrading compared to 62% of visitors from Colorado and just 38% of visitors from other states.

For those who say natural resources have **degraded**, the top factors are:

- Damage from high recreation use or “overuse” and a sense of Chaffee County being “trampled” or “trashed.” This includes damaged roads/trails, and denuded ground and vegetation damage related to off-trail/road use associated with dispersed camping (63%);
- trash and human/dog waste (18%); and
- declining wildlife and concern about habitat fragmentation (13%).



Typical comments include: “Dispersed camping on public land is creating an overwhelming impact that will be hard to restore. Fire danger is an increased risk at these camps and littering and feces has become an environmental concern....every year there is new impact,” “Outdoor recreation growth without management resources is creating ever-increasing impact on a fragile landscape,” and “I see FAR less wildlife as compared to when I moved here 20 years ago.”

Responses to a follow-up question asking what respondents perceive to be the most significant recreation-related environmental challenge were similar: trash, disturbance to wildlife, vegetation damage, and human waste. Roughly 20% of respondents also noted natural resource degradation related to the pace of housing development and the spruce beetle epidemic.

For those who say **natural resources have improved**, the top factors are:

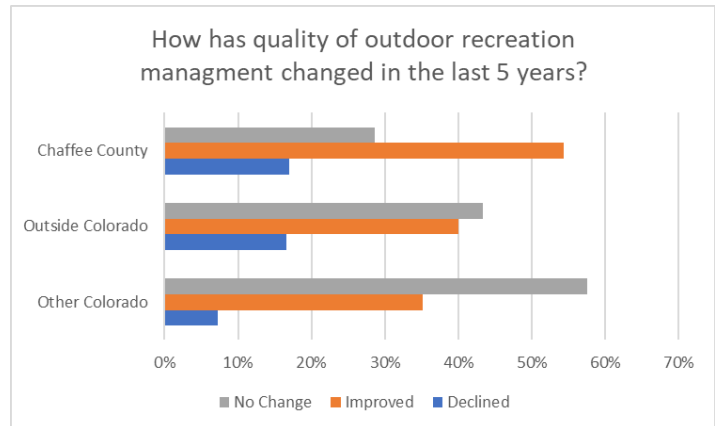
- Improving recreation management, including cleaner campsites, porta-potties, and more durable trails (13%);
- improving river health and fishery (11%); and
- forest fuels mitigation projects or removal of beetle-kill trees (6%).

Typical comments include: “Porta potty’s at Burmac,” “Reigning in dispersed camping has been positive,” and “the river fishery is managed well.”



## Management Strategies Impact

A goal of the re-survey was to provide data to understand if new management approaches, deployed as part of the Chaffee Rec Plan and CPW Regional Partnership, are delivering benefits, even as use increases. When asked how the quality of outdoor recreation management has changed in the last 5 years, a majority of respondents (48%) see an improvement, while 15% see a decline and 36% see no change. The greatest perception of improvement is with residents, 58% of whom see an improvement as shown in the graph.



For those who see **improved management**, the top factors are:

- Better planning and more collaborative management action including presence, cleanup, restrooms and signage (25%). This includes comments related to Chaffee Rec Plan programs including Recreation Rangers (more presence, more management staff), Rec Adopters (more volunteerism, cleaner campsites), Porta Potties, improved signage to address wildfire-risk and better communication/coordination;
- better camping management, including cleaner sites, new designated sites, and some sites that have been removed or contained (10%);
- improved trails (better maintained, great work by local volunteer groups to maintain specific trails, good signage, better bike trails) (9%).

Comments include: “There is a plan and we actually are caring for what happens;”

“More infrastructure and programs/projects to support outdoor rec and rein in negative impacts;” “I have seen people out working and maintaining areas;” “Better communication with user groups;” “Restrooms for the crazy recreational increase. Signage. Barricades. Restrictions on camping by water supplies;” “The river and trail infrastructure quality is very high quality and continues to improve;” and “Better control of camping areas.”

For those who see a **decline in management**, the top factors recognize ongoing critical root issues:

- Insufficient management resources to keep up with increasing use and poor behaviors (27%);
- Overuse or too much use or development (25%); and



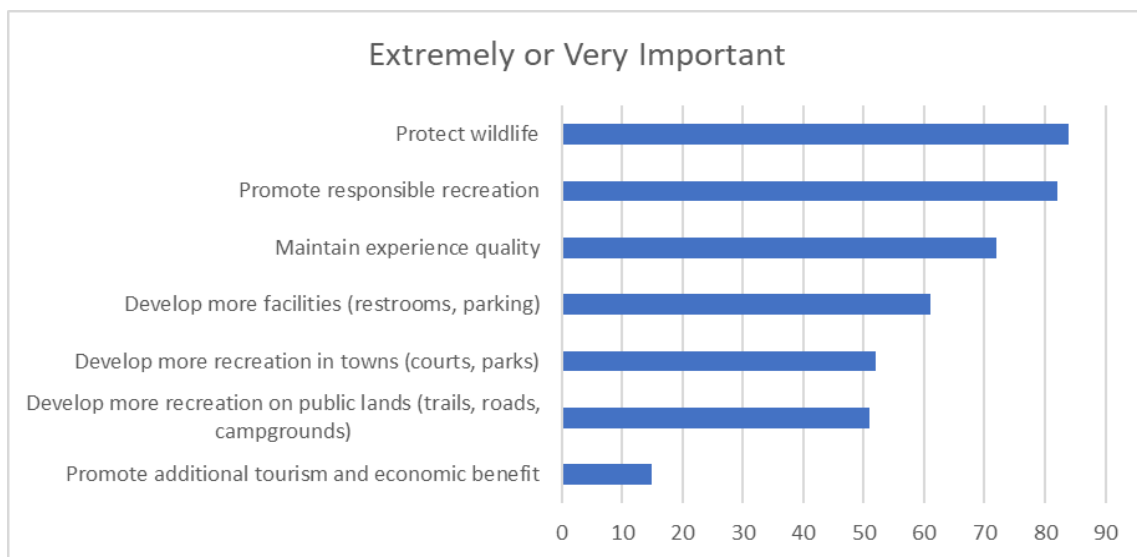
- Need for more enforcement of regulations and more regulations such as managed camping (12%).

Comments include: “not enough budget = not enough management;” “Not enough folks to patrol and keep the users in check;” “Not a decline in management perhaps but outnumbered by public users;” “Lack of funding for staff means not enough people out to do their jobs fixing trails, picking up trash, extinguishing campfires, and educating and enforcing when necessary;” “Heavy usage in the area is making it more difficult to maintain” and “Managed for tourism not for quality.”

### Management Priorities

Respondents were also asked about their priorities for recreation management. Responses, shown in the graph below, prioritize protecting wildlife and promoting responsible recreation. This is consistent with 2020 survey results.

*When managing increasing recreation use, how important are the following:*



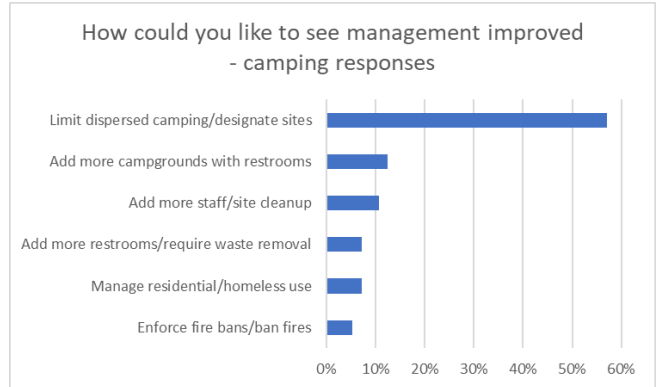
When asked **what areas of outdoor recreation management should be improved**, the top responses were:

- More camping management (23%);
- more regulation (21%);
- management that prioritizes natural resource and wilderness protections (17%);
- trail system maintenance, improvements to address user conflicts (17%); and
- more waste and trash disposal options (15%).

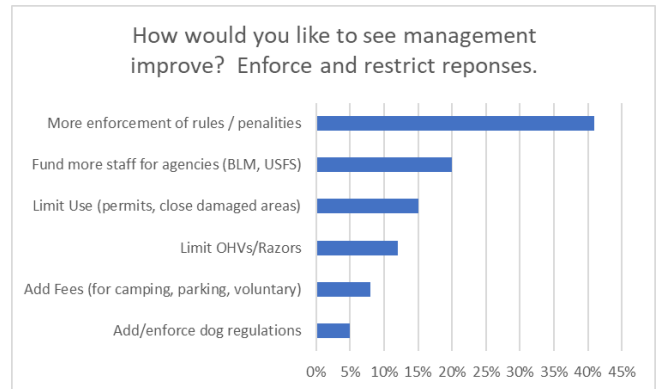


To better understand what solutions are desired and acceptable, more than a thousand comments on management preferences were analyzed to provide additional detail in each of these five categories.

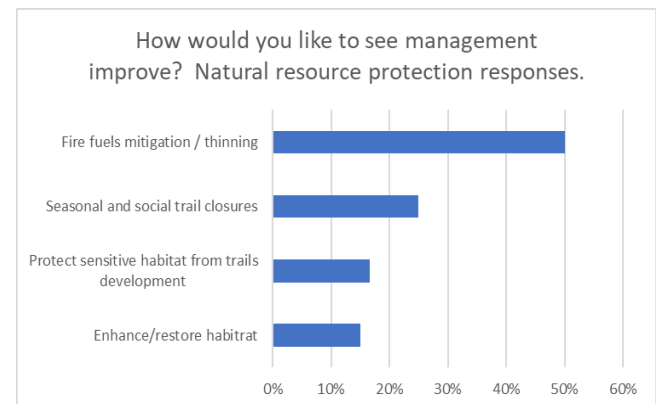
In terms of **more camping management (23%)**, the top response by far was a desire to limit dispersed camping and move to camping in designated sites only. This was followed by a desire for more campgrounds or developed camping areas with restrooms, more staff to clean up and more restrooms in all camping areas and a desire for more management of residential use.



Comments categorized as **more regulation (21%)** express a desire for more enforcement and penalties for those not following existing rules. This is followed by an ask to fund more staff at land management agencies. A significant number also express the desire to limit use, with ideas including permits for camping, closure of damaged areas and social trails and limits for OHV/Razor use. 8% suggested adding fees, such as for camping and parking or a voluntary pass to pay for needed management.



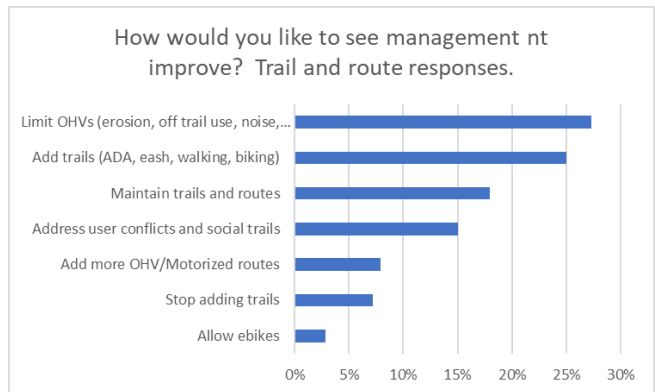
**More management that prioritizes natural resource protection (17%)** included a focus on thinning vegetation and removing beetle kill trees for wildfire fuels mitigation. This was followed by a desire for more seasonal closures of trails and action to address social trails. Protecting sensitive habitat from additional recreation develop and enhancing or restoring habitat were also frequently cited.



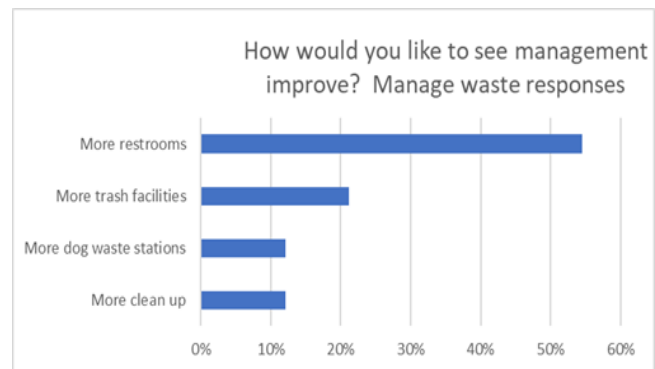


### Management for trails and motorized routes

(17%) included a focus on limiting ATVs, primarily with regulation or enforcement to limit erosion, off trail use and noise. This was followed by a desire for additional trails including easy trails, ADA access trails, walking and biking trails). Next most mentioned was a desire to maintain trails and routes and to address both user conflicts and social trails.



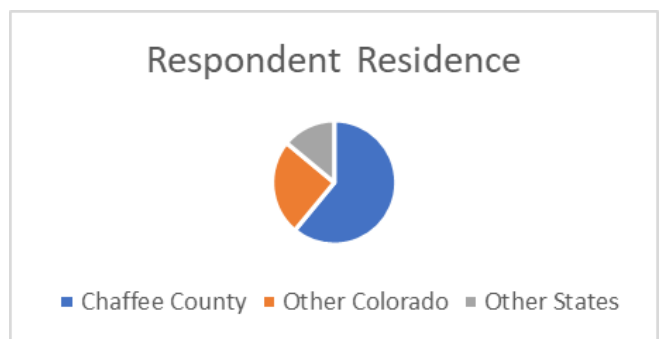
Finally, comments asking for **more management of waste** (15) were asking for more restrooms, more trash disposal options such as trash receptacles and more dog waste stations and general clean up.



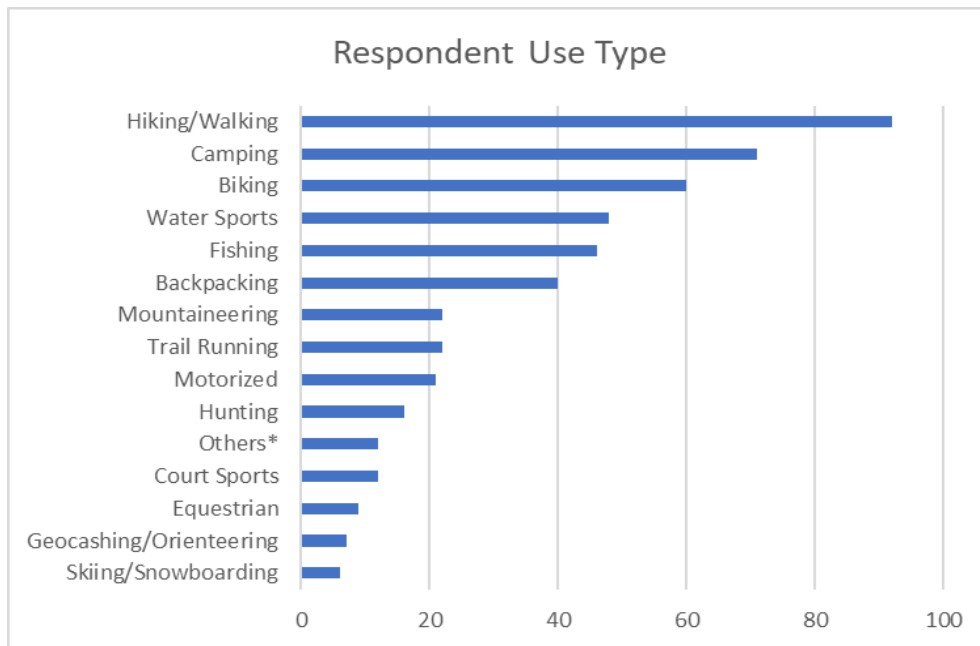
### Survey Demographics

The survey had **1,248** respondents with 61% Chaffee County residents, 25% who live somewhere else in Colorado, and 14% who live outside Colorado. Respondents from all areas have been recreating in Chaffee County for a consistent average of 20 years.

Respondents participate in a diversity of recreation types as shown in the graph below. Most respondents indicate they participate in diverse recreation types. Comments provided in the “other use” category demonstrate the diversity of activities shown on the graph plus many other written in responses including:



Auto trips/driving, bird watching, disc golf, enjoying food/restaurants, photography, gold panning, golf, hot springs, photography, rockhounding, rock climbing, shooting, and wildlife viewing.



## Survey Methods

The Chaffee Recreation Council facilitated the development and distribution of the 15-question survey during a 6-week period from September 1 to October 16, 2023. The survey included questions also used in the 2020 survey. The survey was distributed and promoted through social media as well as traditional media, and by partners of the Chaffee Recreation Council and Recreation Taskforce, to their networks, and by the Chaffee County Visitors Bureau. Survey results were analyzed by Smoyer and Associates, who grouped 4,000+ comments and then were analyzed by the Chaffee Rec Council.

## Raw Data

Survey questions with all raw data are available at this link: [SurveyMonkey Data Link](#)