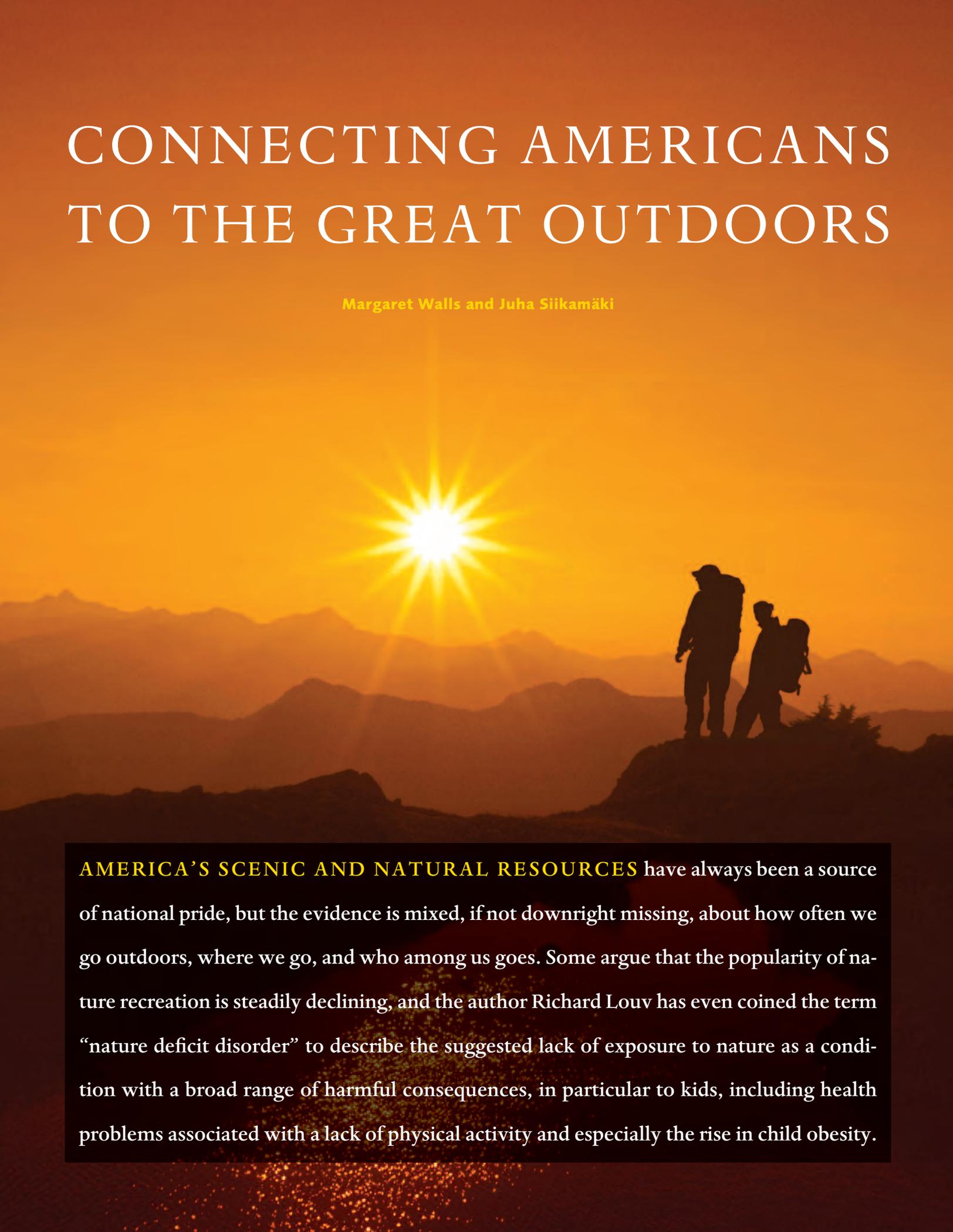


# CONNECTING AMERICANS TO THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Margaret Walls and Juha Siikamäki

The background of the entire page is a warm, golden-orange sunset. In the center, a bright sun with a starburst effect is positioned above a range of mountains. In the foreground, the silhouettes of two hikers with large backpacks are visible on a rocky ridge, looking out over the landscape. The overall mood is peaceful and inspiring.

**AMERICA'S SCENIC AND NATURAL RESOURCES** have always been a source of national pride, but the evidence is mixed, if not downright missing, about how often we go outdoors, where we go, and who among us goes. Some argue that the popularity of nature recreation is steadily declining, and the author Richard Louv has even coined the term “nature deficit disorder” to describe the suggested lack of exposure to nature as a condition with a broad range of harmful consequences, in particular to kids, including health problems associated with a lack of physical activity and especially the rise in child obesity.

**A**ND THERE'S NO LACK OF CONCERN AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL: This April, President Obama signed a formal memorandum, launching the America's Great Outdoors Initiative. The primary goal is to "reconnect Americans, especially children, to America's rivers and waterways, landscapes of national significance, ranches, farms and forests, great parks, and coasts and beaches." Later this year, a cabinet-level report will be submitted to the president with a review of existing federal government and other conservation programs and a recommended strategy for achieving the initiative's goals.

We'll have to wait and see how the report addresses two emerging, linked trends that are especially relevant to the initiative. First, there has been a marked change in federal spending toward conservation, away from lands purposed for recreation and toward farmland, wetlands, and wildlife habitat. In addition, there has been a move to purchase easements (deed restrictions on land uses) on private land, where public access is often limited. Second, there is a growing shift toward private land conservation, marked by the enormous growth in land trusts over the past 20 years, in both their sheer numbers and the amount of acreage protected.

While conservation of this type may yield a variety of benefits—including wildlife habitat preservation, protection of prime farmland, management of stormwater runoff, and maintenance of view sheds—the extent to which such efforts connect Americans to nature is debatable. Private lands, even those covered by easements, are, generally not open to the public, and a significant portion of the lands protected by federal conservation programs are far from where the majority of Americans live.

So where to go from here? Should the new initiative lead to a shift in priorities, especially funding priorities? If the goal is to reconnect Americans to nature and the outdoors—and this may be a worthy goal for a variety of reasons ranging from health, environmental stewardship, and for children, basic science and nature education—what is the best use of the government's limited financial resources?

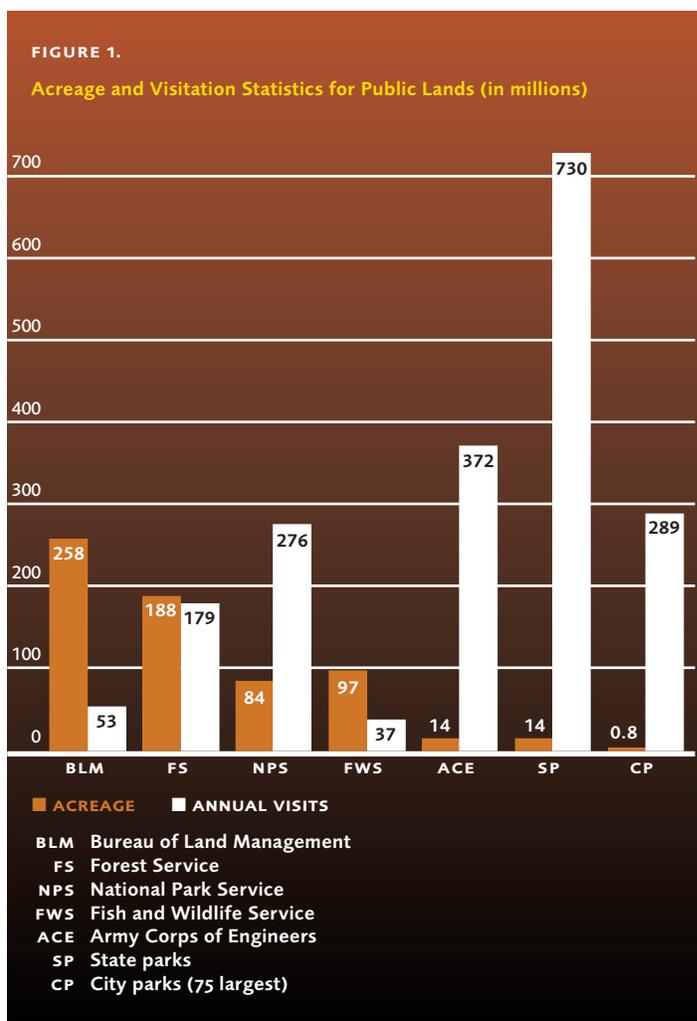
### AMERICANS OUTDOORS

A variety of data and statistics can shed light on the degree to which Americans are connected to the outdoors. We discuss here two main sources: visitation statistics for public lands and annual time-use survey data.

Various types of public lands exhibit a remarkable consistency in visitation trends: from the late 1970s, total annual visits have remained relatively constant while visits per capita show a slight decline. This is true for lands managed by the National Park Service, Army Corps of Engineers recreation sites (which have the highest number of visitors of any federal sites), Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands, and state parks. National wildlife refuges may be the exception to the rule: although data are available only since 1994, the

number of total refuge visits and visits per capita show a small but steady rise over time. Interestingly, many refuges are located much closer to cities than are national parks and other federal lands. With 80 percent of the U.S. population living in urban areas, understanding the opportunities for and activities of this segment of the population is critical. Unfortunately, systematic and comprehensive data on local and urban park use are unavailable. The few data that exist, from the Trust for Public Land's Center for City Park Excellence, show visits to city parks to be quite high. The 75 largest city parks in 2007 hosted 289 million visitors on just 800,000 acres of land. In contrast, the National Park Service had about the same number of visitors on 84 million acres of land, and the 14 million acres of state parks—known as highly visited natural areas—attracted 730 million visitors (see Figure 1). But more comprehensive and detailed data on urban park use are needed.

National data on time use are underutilized for the study of outdoor recreation and yield some unique insights. Data from six nationally representative time-use surveys conducted between 1965 and 2007 show that time spent in outdoor recreation and physically active leisure in general has increased substantially in the long run—



from about 0.9 hours per person per week in 1965 to 2 hours per person per week in 2007—but that most of the increase occurred by 1993; since then the numbers have declined. The participation rate—that is, the percentage of the population that participated in outdoor recreation on any given day—rose sharply between 1965 and 1985 but has held steady since then.

Our analysis of the data yielded several interesting demographic findings. For one thing, men spend about 70 percent more time in outdoor pursuits than women. For another, more education tends to lead to more time spent on outdoor recreation. And households without children spend more time in outdoor recreation than those with children.

One of our most important findings has to do with leisure time availability: the more leisure an individual has, the greater the likelihood she participates, and the more time she spends, in outdoor recreation. Overall, a 10 percent increase in leisure time leads to about a 6.5 percent increase in time spent in outdoor recreation. Some experts have argued that a decline in the availability of leisure in recent years, particularly leisure that comes in large blocks of time, has led to a decline in visits to national parks and other sites located far from population centers.

### GOVERNMENT FUNDING

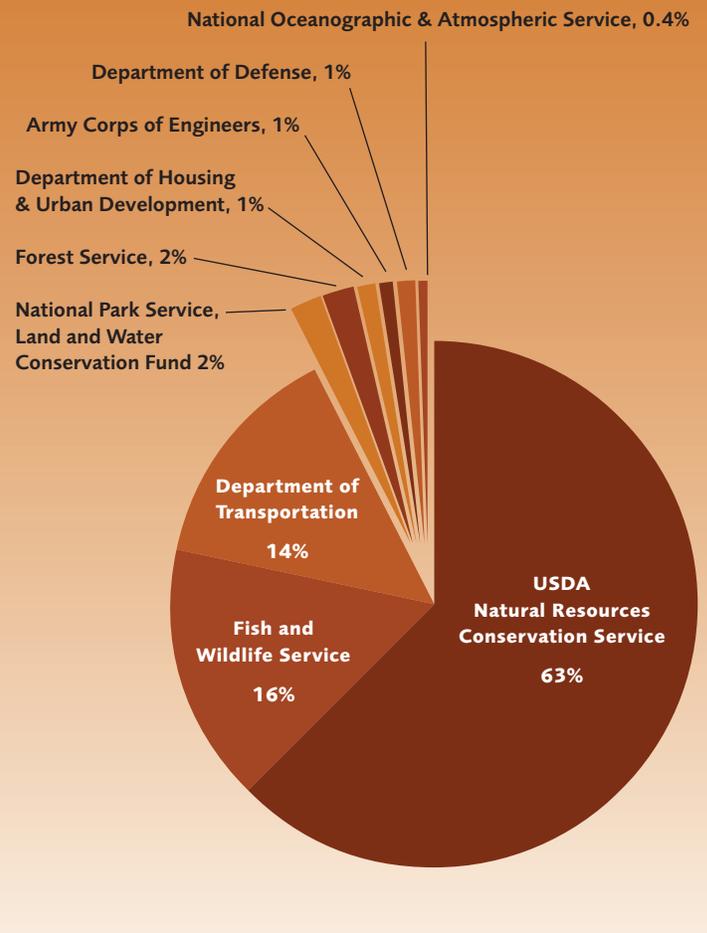
Many of the public lands that support outdoor recreation were created with an important source of federal funding, the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). Initiated in 1965, the fund has permanently protected over 7 million acres of land through direct acquisition, either by the federal government or by state and local governments that receive LWCF grant money. Substantially more has been statutorily protected through development projects built with LWCF funds. For the first 15 years of the program, annual LWCF appropriations averaged \$1.23 billion in inflation-adjusted 2008 dollars; 54 percent of that money went to state grants. Since the early 1980s, however, appropriations have declined significantly as has the share going to states. LWCF appropriations in FY2008 totaled \$255 million, with less than 10 percent of that going to states. State grants currently are so low that many states do not bother applying for them. Funding has also been diverted to other uses besides land acquisition in recent years.

As the LWCF has declined in importance, the entire landscape of funding for conservation and recreation has shifted. Over 30 other programs besides the LWCF now exist at the federal level for funding land conservation activities, many initiated in the 1990s and 2000s (Figure 2). The programs deal with habitat conservation and restoration, development of trails, urban parks, wetlands, forests, and farmland and are managed by nine different agencies. They are funded in a variety of ways and the money is spent in different ways. The bulk of it, however, is spent on the programs specified in the Farm Bill. The Department of Agriculture received nearly 63 percent of the

FIGURE 2.

#### Funding for Federal Conservation and Recreation Programs by Agency

Note: Data are from FY2008. All sources available in Walls, Darley, and Siikamäki (2008).



money spent on conservation-related activities in FY2008, and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) was the largest single federal program, with a nearly \$2 billion annual budget. It is important to point out that the CRP keeps land in private landowners' hands, does not permanently protect land from development, and does not require landowners to allow public access. (A program in the most recent farm bill provides some funding to encourage that.) The Fish and Wildlife Service accounted for 16 percent of all spending in FY2008; most of this money goes toward habitat protection, particularly for migratory birds. The Department of Transportation's Recreational Trails and Transportation Enhancements programs received 14 percent of all conservation and recreation appropriations in FY2008.

In addition to federal funding programs, many states have created their own conservation funding programs and tax incentives over the past 20 years. Our research identified 79 programs in 43 states totaling \$3.3 billion in FY2008. In addition, 15 states provide income tax credits for conservation land or easement donations. With one exception, all of the tax credits have been adopted since 1999.

Finally, at the local level, many communities have turned to the voters with referenda. In 2008, \$8 billion was approved for a variety of conservation spending programs.

### IN PRIVATE HANDS

Conservation land trust is the catch-all term for a nonprofit and non-governmental organization that acquires and protects land from development. Although the earliest land trusts were established in the 1800s, they have emerged in recent years as central actors in land conservation. They work to protect wilderness areas, historically important areas, wildlife habitat and natural areas, and working farms and forests.

Land trusts obtain real estate from landowners who sell or donate conservation easements, or by outright purchases of property. They include large organizations such as the Nature Conservancy and the Audubon Society, but many are formed by relatively small organizations operating at community, state, or regional levels. According to the Land Trust Alliance (LTA), nearly 1,700 local land trusts operated in the United States in 2005, the most recent year for which data are available. The number has increased gradually, nearly doubling during the last 10 years. The land area protected has increased more rapidly, from about 6 million acres in 2000 to 12 million acres in 2005—nearly the size of the state of Maryland (see Table 1).

Much of the increase in the areas protected by local land trusts comes from the growing use of easements and other contractual arrangements rather than through direct purchases. As of 2005, only about 14 percent of the total area conserved by local land trusts is in their ownership; the rest is under conservation easements (53 percent) or has been protected by other means (33 percent), such as acquisition by other organizations or agencies. An easement purchase poses a smaller financial burden for a land trust than a purchase of land itself, thus the movement toward easements is understandable. As with the shift in federal funding, though, these lands are not usually a substitute for the kinds of projects supported by the LWCF.

### SETTING PRIORITIES FOR THE FUTURE

As the America's Great Outdoors Initiative moves forward, it will probably do so in an era of fiscal austerity. Large new spending programs are unlikely without dedicated sources of revenue. This makes priority setting especially important.

In our view, two things are needed in order to establish those priorities. First, we need better information about and analysis of the extent of the “nature deficit” problem. On the one hand, polls routinely show that Americans value land conservation and protection of open space. The high approval rate of voter referenda—76 percent have passed since 1990—supports that view. But how does this square with the fact that an average person probably spends less and less time in outdoor pursuits? Second, we need to review our current programs—federal, state, local, and private—and carefully catalogue what we’re getting for our money and where the gaps lie. Does the mix of farmland, wetlands, trails, and parks seem to be in balance? What about the geographic distribution of protected lands? What about the distribution between private lands and public? And to what extent are we providing funds for management of the lands we have versus acquisition of more? Operations and maintenance budget shortfalls have been well documented.

Since the quality of our open spaces and recreation lands may be as important as the quantity, revisiting this aspect of spending is critical. Much of our outdoor recreation policy and infrastructure was shaped already decades ago, and it may be time to realign them to better reflect today's needs. But before we can do so, we must better understand what those needs are. ■

### FURTHER READING

- Ferris, Jeffrey, and Juha Siikamäki. 2009. Conservation Reserve Program and Wetland Reserve Program: Primary Land Retirement Programs for Promoting Farmland Conservation. Background. Washington, DC: Resources for the Future. [www.rff.org/RFF/Documents/RFF-BCK-ORRG\\_CRP\\_and\\_WRP.pdf](http://www.rff.org/RFF/Documents/RFF-BCK-ORRG_CRP_and_WRP.pdf).
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- Walls, Margaret A., Sarah R. Darley, and Juha V. Siikamäki. 2009. *The State of the Great Outdoors: America's Parks, Public Lands, and Recreation Resources*. Washington, DC: Resources for the Future. [www.rff.org/RFF/Documents/RFF-RPT-ORRG-State-of-Outdoors.pdf](http://www.rff.org/RFF/Documents/RFF-RPT-ORRG-State-of-Outdoors.pdf).

**TABLE 1.**  
Total Acres in Local, State,  
and Regional Land Trusts in  
2000 and 2005

Source: Land Trust Alliance 2006

| Conservation method | 2000             |            | 2005              |            | Increase 2000–2005 |           |
|---------------------|------------------|------------|-------------------|------------|--------------------|-----------|
|                     | ACRES            | PERCENT    | ACRES             | PERCENT    | ACRES              | PERCENT   |
| Ownership           | 1,219,632        | 20         | 1,703,212         | 14         | 483,580            | 40        |
| Easements           | 2,514,545        | 42         | 6,245,969         | 53         | 3,731,424          | 148       |
| Other means         | 2,322,447        | 38         | 3,940,928         | 33         | 1,618,481          | 70        |
| <b>Grand total</b>  | <b>6,056,624</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>11,890,109</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>5,833,485</b>   | <b>96</b> |