



Lake & River Use

RESOURCE BRIEF

**Importance**

Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area (NRA) was established to provide public outdoor recreational use and enjoyment of Bighorn Lake, Bighorn River, and adjacent land, and to preserve park resources. Popular lake activities include water skiing, fishing, personal watercraft use (e.g., jet skis), swimming, canoeing, and kayaking. The Bighorn River, north of Afterbay Dam and Yellowtail Dam in Montana, is a world class trout fishing area. Afterbay Lake, located between Yellowtail and Afterbay dams, provides outstanding wildlife viewing opportunities and trout fishing. Recreational use of Bighorn Lake and Bighorn River contribute to local economies in Montana and Wyoming. Fishing and boating are subject to Montana and Wyoming state regulations.



Motorboat on Bighorn Lake near Trail Creek.

**Status**

Between 1997 and 2007, 2,301,282 recreational visitors, including fishers, boaters, campers, and swimmers, were documented in Bighorn Canyon NRA, where visitation fluctuates yearly. (Figure 1.) Boat docks are adjusted when lake levels change and the water quality of swimming areas, which can be affected by shallow water, is monitored for visitor safety. In 2000, a National Park Service-wide regulation prohibited use of personal watercrafts in most parks. Personal watercraft use in Bighorn Canyon NRA was prohibited in 2002, but was reinstated in 2005 after examining the park’s enabling legislation, resources and values, other visitor uses, and overall management objectives. The Horseshoe Bend campground is being improved to increase visitor satisfaction.

**Discussion**

Lake level is affected by annual precipitation and outflows from the Yellowtail Dam, which is managed by the Bureau of Reclamation. Managers consider human safety and impacts from lake use on park resources including water, air, and soundscape (e.g., noise caused by motors in the steep-walled canyon), visitor experiences, and the local economy when making use decisions. Impacts on archaeological sites are of little concern since most are inaccessible from the lake or are submerged approximately 80 feet underwater; changes in lake level rarely expose sites. The park has two marinas, Ok-A-Beh and Horseshoe Bend, which include launch ramps and concessions. However, Horseshoe Bend, located in southern Bighorn Canyon, may not be accessible at low lake levels. Additional launch ramps are located at Barry’s Landing and Afterbay.

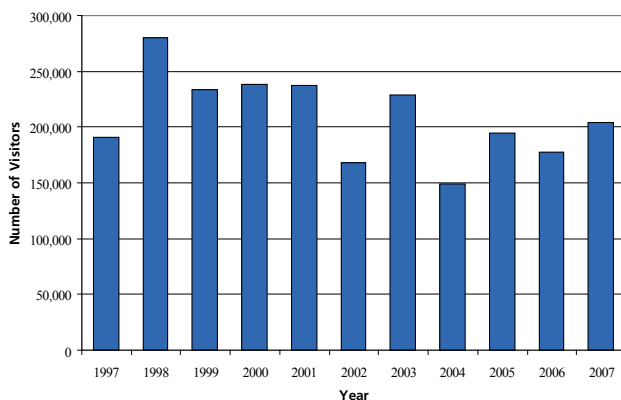


Figure 1. Annual Visitation at Bighorn Canyon NRA.



Boaters near Barry's Island.

