

THREE EAGLE TRAIL:

The Economic Significance of a Community Connector



Executive Summary

The Three Eagle Trail is a 12.7-mile bike and pedestrian path connecting the communities of Three Lakes and Eagle River. While the two communities are already linked by the world's largest chain of lakes and the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, the trail offers a direct and scenic route for people on foot, bike or skis, making silent sports accessible year-round.

This region has long drawn visitors attracted by its outdoor recreation opportunities. In fact, many of today's seasonal residents started as vacationers during the resort boom of decades past. They fell in love with the trails, lakes and forests and returned year after year, eventually buying their own piece of Northwoods paradise.

By studying the use of the Three Eagle Trail through trail counters and user surveys, data demonstrate the trail is an economic catalyst for the area, attracting visitors, seasonal homeowners and locals alike who use the trail year-round. The trail benefits users by encouraging safe and healthy recreation, forming better-connected transportation options and providing social and economic contributions to the surrounding areas. There is also a significant desire from users to expand the trail's connectivity to other bike and pedestrian trail networks in the area.

**Visitors to the
Three Eagle Trail
contribute \$2
million to the
economies of Three
Lakes and Eagle
River each summer.**



Connecting Communities

The study area for this analysis includes the communities of Lincoln, Eagle River and Three Lakes. Spending was specifically assessed in Eagle River and Three Lakes, where most visitor activity and local business spending occur.

Three Lakes and Eagle River are already linked by the world's largest chain of lakes and the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest - two defining landscapes that have drawn visitors to the area for generations. The Three Eagle Trail strengthens that connection, offering a non-motorized route for recreation and active travel between the two communities.

Built on retired railroad corridors that once carried lumber through the Northwoods, the trail was completed in two phases: the southern section in 2007 and the northern in 2014. Today, it features a mix of paved and crushed limestone surfaces that provide year-round access for biking, walking and skiing. Meanwhile, the forested middle section offers quiet rivers, creeks and wooded glens for exploration. The trail also links to the nearby Tara Lila trails, expanding winter opportunities for fat biking and snowshoeing.

The Three Eagle Trail Foundation, a volunteer-led nonprofit, maintains the trail entirely through the generous support of residents and visitors; no tax revenue or user fees are required.



Who Uses the Trail, and How

For more than a century, visitors have come north to enjoy the forests, lakes and quiet beauty of this part of Wisconsin. Many who first arrived as tourists later became second homeowners, returning season after season to enjoy the same trails and lakes that first drew them here. The Three Eagle Trail continues that tradition, connecting Three Lakes and Eagle River through a shared love of outdoor recreation.

Of those surveyed, 87% identified outdoor recreation as their primary reason for visiting, underscoring the area's strong connection between recreation and local tourism. The trail serves an even balance of user types: 36% visitors, 31% seasonal residents or second homeowners, and 33% year-round residents.

Biking is the most common activity (77%), and many (63%) travel the trail's entire 12.7-mile length, often as a scenic out-and-back ride. The majority (68%) use the trail three or more times a year, underscoring its role as part of everyday life. Primary motivations include health and exercise (89%), experiencing nature (80%) and spending time with others.

The data shows that the trail isn't just a place to pass through; it's part of the rhythm of local life, offering connection between people, places and the communities at each end.

Three Eagle Trail Users



36% out-of-town visitors

31% seasonal or second home owners

33% year-round residents

87% came to enjoy the outdoors

89% use the trail for general health and exercise

68% used the trail three or more times in the past year

63% traveled the entire trail on their most recent visit

Summer Spending and Local Significance

Summer users of the Three Eagle Trail make a meaningful contribution to the economies of Three Lakes and Eagle River. Based on trail counts and survey data, an estimated 10,659 people used the trail between May and October, spending an average of \$206 per person.

This activity represents about \$2 million in total local business activity, reflecting the direct value of trail use to area communities. Spending was led by lodging and camping, followed by restaurants, bars and grocery purchases, gas or transportation, retail or souvenirs, recreation fees, and outdoor equipment or gear. Visitors reported that 51% of their spending occurred in Eagle River, 38% in Three Lakes and 11% elsewhere in Vilas and Oneida counties.

Most (66%) spending came from out-of-town visitors, while seasonal homeowners contributed 26% and year-round residents 8%, underscoring the trail's importance in attracting new dollars to the local economy.

As this money circulates through local businesses, supporting wages, supplies and services, it reinforces the trail's importance as an economic driver for the communities it connects. Together, these findings show how the Three Eagle Trail supports recreation, strengthens local businesses and sustains the vitality of both communities throughout the summer season.

Recreation Benefits for All

The Three Eagle Trail is woven into everyday life for residents and is a must-do experience for visitors; more than two-thirds return multiple times each year. The trail provides convenient, year-round access to fitness activities such as walking, jogging, biking and skiing. Exercising in nature supports physical health, lowers stress and strengthens social connections among those who share the path.

The trail also provides a safe, off-road travel corridor between Three Lakes and Eagle River, separating cyclists and pedestrians from vehicle traffic.

As a repurposed historic rail corridor, the trail encourages non-motorized travel, reducing emissions and preserving adjacent forests and wetlands. During winter, partnerships with local snowmobile clubs convert two-thirds of the 12.7-mile route for snowmobiling, while the middle section is groomed for cross-country skiing.

This commitment to year-round use and collaboration benefits the broader community and helps drive economic growth that extends beyond the summer season. By creating safe, sustainable spaces for recreation, transportation and connection, the Three Eagle Trail enhances the quality of life and strengthens the area's reputation as a place where outdoor experiences and community well-being thrive together.



"Having trails connected to our downtown area has been an economic boon for almost all of our local businesses. The trails bring people into town to shop, eat and sleep. We are personally always excited to sponsor local trail events and constantly hear that a new customer was told they 'had to check us out' after participating in a local ride or run."

**-Jessica Allen, Owner,
The Hiker Box
(Eagle River)**

Economic Significance



10,659
estimated
seasonal
trail users



\$206
average spending
per user



\$2 million
in local business
activity for
Three Lakes and
Eagle River

Expanding Connections and Creating New Trails

Trail users consistently show that connectivity and infrastructure matter. People who value trail connections spend 113% more across all categories; evidence that investing in trails pays dividends for local businesses.

Building on that insight, the Three Eagle Trail Foundation is working with local partners to add new biking infrastructure directly to the Three Eagle Trail. Planned improvements include bike repair stations, water access points, rest areas and enhanced signage, all designed to improve safety, usability and the visitor experience. The Foundation, in collaboration with local partners, is also exploring a future connection with the Heart of Vilas County Bike Trail, extending opportunities for long-distance cycling and regional travel.

Meanwhile, the Three Lakes Visitors Bureau is using this data to demonstrate the economic potential of cycling and encourage stakeholders to consider new mountain bike and gravel trail development in the area. Goals include a mountain-bike skills park near town and potential single-track projects in partnership with the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest.

Together, these initiatives reflect a shared vision: strengthening existing trails while creating new opportunities for riders. With collaboration and continued investment, communities can build on proven results, transforming outdoor recreation into long-term economic growth, healthier residents and stronger connections.



"The Three Eagle Trail has become a part of the landscape of Three Lakes Winery, literally and figuratively, as it runs adjacent to the winery property.

Our parking lot has become an unofficial trailhead as people love to say, 'let's go for a bike ride on the trail; we'll meet you at the winery,' park their cars and hit the trail and come back all smiles..."

Mark McCain, Owner,
Three Lakes Winery (Three Lakes)



Methodology

The economic impact analysis is based on data collected from Three Eagle Trail users between June and September 2025. Trail counters placed along the trail collect data throughout the year. Data was downloaded and analyzed to estimate the number of users of the summer season, defined as May 1 through October 31, 2025. An online user survey conducted during the same period yielded 450 responses, providing direct data on visitor spending, behavior and motivations.

The economic contributions of trail user spending to the local economy were estimated using a sales area multiplier calculated using the formula provided by Wen-Huei Chen in "Variations in multipliers and related economic ratios for recreation and tourism impact analysis" (Michigan State University, 2001) and applying a conservative capture rate of 70% to reflect the proportion of visitor spending that is retained in the local economy.



OutdoorRecreation.wi.gov



3EagleTrail.org



ThreeLakes.com



GHTrails.org



HarbingerConsult.com

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