

OCONTO COUNTY:

Where Water Meets Wilderness – The Economic Value of a Loyal Visitor Base



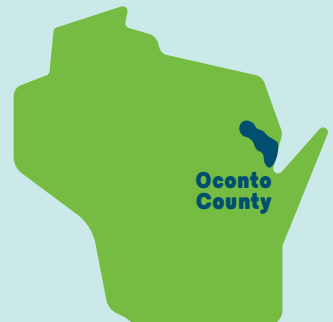
Executive Summary

Oconto County offers a rare combination of water access and trail networks that attract outdoor enthusiasts across all seasons. With 379 lakes, 1,000-plus miles of streams, over 100 miles of Green Bay shoreline and more than 500 miles of ATV/UTV trails connecting communities, anglers, trail riders, paddlers and nature seekers find their ideal outdoor playground in Oconto County.

Understanding who visits Oconto County and how they spend their time and money reveals important patterns about the area's outdoor recreation economy. This data suggests that the county's greatest asset may not be first-time visitors discovering the region, but rather, the deeply loyal base of repeat guests. These findings point to opportunities for strategic investment in the amenities and infrastructure that serve this established visitor community while also attracting new enthusiasts to experience what keeps people coming back.

The patterns emerging from visitor behavior indicate that fishing and motorized trail recreation drive the highest economic returns, with water-based activities generating substantial per-visit spending. This information can help guide future decisions about how communities leverage outdoor recreation for economic development.

**Remarkably, 97%
of all outdoor
recreation visitors to
Oconto County are
repeat guests, and
anglers spend the
most, over \$2,000
per group per trip.**



A Four-Season Outdoor Destination

Oconto County’s 1,000 square miles encompass diverse terrain – from Green Bay’s expansive shoreline to the Nicolet National Forest’s northern edge. The county’s natural assets connect its communities, from the port city of Oconto to the trail town of Townsend.

The county’s 500-plus miles of ATV/UTV trails link communities and provide access to businesses, while public boat launches, fishing piers and water access points provide entry to the 379 lakes and 1,073 miles of streams. In winter, trail networks serve snowmobilers, and the county’s abundant waters draw ice fishing enthusiasts.

To better understand how outdoor recreation contributes to local economies, Tourism & Economic Development Corporation for the Oconto Region (TEDCOR) conducted visitor research during 2025. The findings suggest that Oconto County attracts a particular type of visitor – one who returns frequently, stays multiple days and engages in several different activities during each trip.

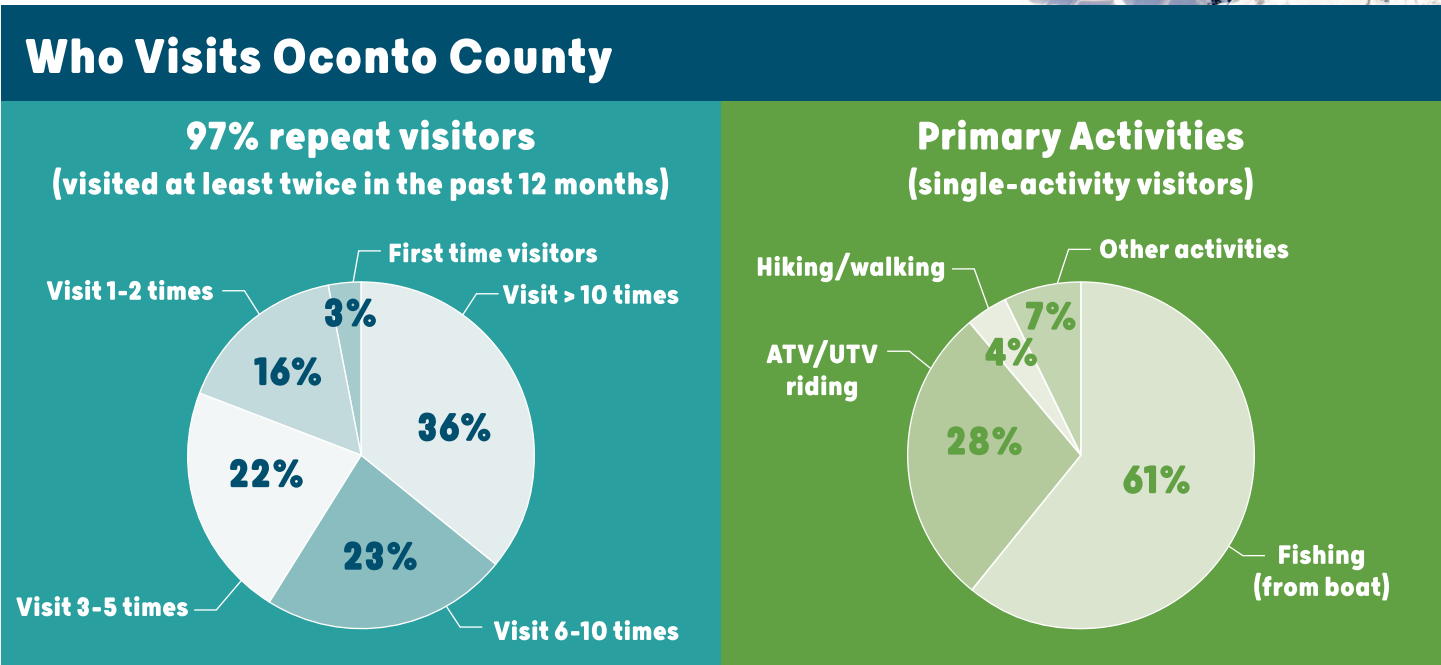
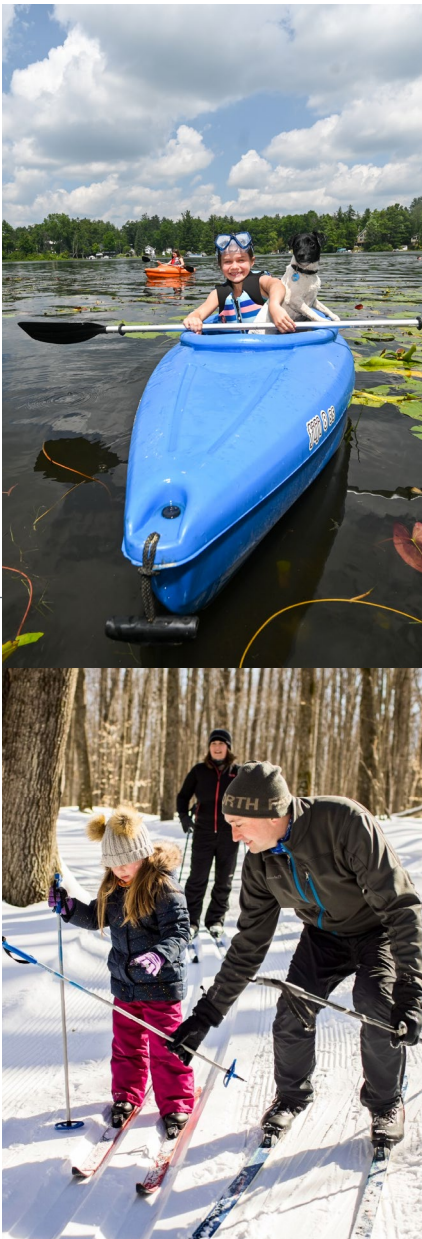
A Loyal Visitor Base

The data suggests a visitor profile different from other tourism destinations. Rather than relying on a constant influx of new guests, Oconto County appears to attract a core group of outdoor enthusiasts who treat the area as their go-to destination throughout the year.

This pattern of repeat visitation shows up across all major activities. Among those who selected fishing from a boat as their primary activity, 81% visited 3 or more times. For ATV/UTV riders, loyalty appears to be strong also. Nearly half (48%) visited more than 10 times in the past 12 months.

Most visitors travel in groups of 2-4 people and typically stay 3-4 nights per trip. Many respondents indicated they engage in multiple activities during their visits, creating a more diverse economic footprint than single-activity tourism.

Understanding this loyalty offers insights for business and community planning. Focusing efforts to deepen established relationships could be explored rather than marketing to new audiences.



Fishing and Trails Drive Economic Activity

Clear patterns of visitor spending across activities emerged. Fishing was the highest-value activity, with anglers (whether fishing from a boat, shore or a pier) spending an average of \$2,000 per group per visit. These visitors report investing in lodging (averaging \$170 per night), meals, bait and tackle, fuel and other trip expenses. These trips involve substantial investment in the full experience - from quality accommodations to meals at local restaurants to the fishing itself.

For boat anglers, daily spending averages \$180 per person. This provides a starting point for estimating the contributions of fishing tournaments, which provide concentrated spending boosts at local businesses. For example, just one fishing tournament, the AIM Weekend Walleye Series tournament, which took place August 22-23, 2025, drew 65 teams who spent \$70,200 locally over that weekend.

ATV and UTV riders represent the second-largest visitor segment by participation, though their spending patterns differ. These groups report an average total spend of \$1,279 per trip, with lower nightly lodging costs (\$63 per night) but comparable trip lengths. The lower lodging expenses may reflect different accommodation choices - campgrounds or budget motels versus resorts or vacation rentals - while still contributing substantially to the local economy through fuel purchases, restaurant meals and recreation-related retail.

Per group trip spending for water-based activities beyond fishing - kayaking, canoeing, and non-fishing boating - averages around \$1,600. These visitors often engage in multiple activities, suggesting they're drawn to the area's overall outdoor recreation landscape rather than a single pursuit.

Beyond Economics: Community Value

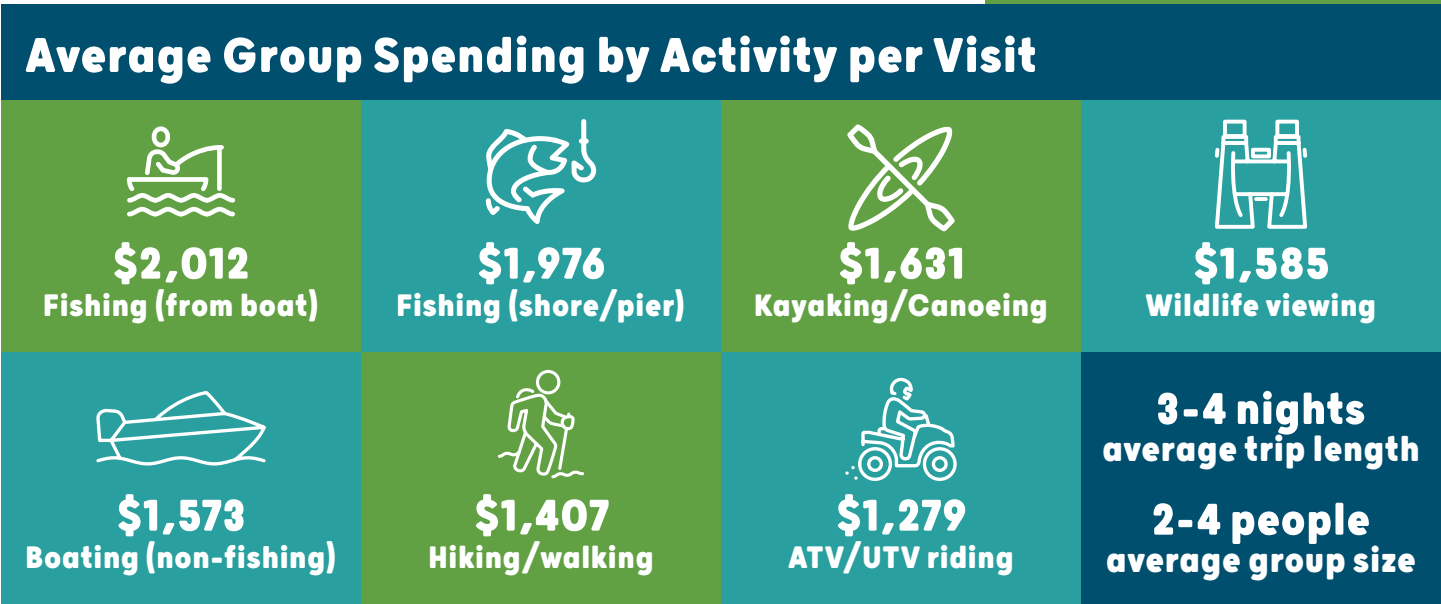
Outdoor recreation in Oconto County creates value that extends beyond visitor spending. The trail systems connecting communities provide year-round transportation and recreation options for all.

The county's public water access points - boat launches, fishing piers and swimming areas - serve as community gathering places, particularly in summer months. These amenities support youth fishing programs, community events and everyday recreation for residents across all age groups.



"In our small city of Oconto, the Bay of Green Bay is our bread and butter. We can't make it on locals alone-we need those repeat visitors coming back season after season. These aren't just tourists passing through-they're people who care about this place as much as we do."

Paul Lukas, Owner,
North Shore Bait Company
(Oconto)



Building the Data Foundation for Strategic Decisions

This initial visitor research reveals patterns that raise important questions – questions that can guide how communities, businesses and organizations make decisions about outdoor recreation in Oconto County. But these preliminary findings also illuminate what we still need to learn.

With the data collected so far as a starting point, targeted research with specific user groups would offer additional insights. TEDCOR plans to expand this data collection effort beginning in winter and spring 2026, starting with ice fishing enthusiasts and participants in fishing tournaments. These focused studies will capture more detailed spending patterns, trip-planning behaviors and satisfaction factors among the county's highest-value visitor segments.

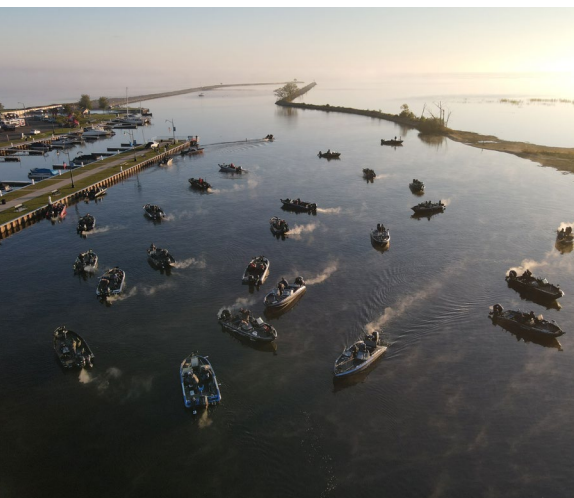
Future research phases may examine other activity segments – paddlers, wildlife viewers, trail riders during different seasons – to build a comprehensive understanding of visitor behavior across all four seasons. This data becomes a resource for communities considering investments, businesses planning expansions or new services and organizations advocating for outdoor recreation infrastructure.

The loyalty demonstrated in this initial data suggests visitors have already chosen Oconto County as their outdoor recreation destination. The next phase of research will help answer why they keep returning, what would encourage them to stay longer or visit more frequently, and how to ensure the experience that built this loyalty continues to meet their expectations. With better data, communities and businesses can make more informed decisions about how to leverage outdoor recreation for economic development while maintaining the authentic experiences that created this loyal visitor base in the first place.



"We're steps away from the ATV/UTV trails, and honestly, that trail access is everything for us. ATV and UTV riders make up 99.9% of our tourism. Last Saturday, I counted six locals in my bar—we had well over 300 patrons that day. Without those trail riders coming through, we wouldn't be here. They're not just passing by, they're stopping in, spending money and keeping doors open for small-town businesses like ours."

**Leida Wesolaski, Owner,
Arrowhead Saloon (Breed)**



Methodology

This report draws from visitor survey data collected during 2025 by TEDCOR. The research employed an online survey distributed through multiple channels, including social media, local business partnerships and tourism communications.

To focus on visitor economic impact, responses from the 22 respondents listing Oconto County zip codes as their home address were excluded from spending calculations, resulting in 155 valid responses from non-local visitors.

Total visitor spending per trip was calculated by multiplying reported daily spending by the number of nights spent. For day-trip visitors, single-day spending was used. Averages were calculated only for respondents who provided complete spending and duration data for each analysis.

Economic multiplier effects and secondary impacts on local employment were not calculated as part of this analysis. The findings represent daily self-reported, direct visitor spending.

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OutdoorRecreation.wi.gov

TEDCOR
Tourism & Economic Development
Corporation for the Oconto Region
TEDCOR.org

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