

INSTITUTE FOR TOURISM & RECREATION RESEARCH

Montana Tourism Outlook for 2025: Balancing Innovation and Tradition

2025 BBER Economic Seminar

Dr. Melissa Weddell, PhD, MBA



PRESENTATION OUTLINE

- Who we are
- ITRR Research Projects
- Travel Industry
- Outdoor Recreation Economy
- AI and Tourism Industry
- 2025 Tourism Outlook



ITRR RESEARCH PRIORITIES + CYCLE

ITRR serves as the research arm for Montana's tourism and recreation industry

Established in 1987 at the University of Montana's W.A. Franke College of Forestry and Conservation

Funded by a portion of the revenues from the state Lodging Facility Use Tax

Objective Research in tourism and recreation to support industry for strategic planning, marketing, policymaking, and management overseen by the TAC

Supports Montana Public Agencies & Businesses through reliable, objective research on visitor services and facility management



38 YEARS OF PROVIDING TRAVEL, TOURISM, AND RECREATION RESEARCH



Dr. Melissa Weddell
Director & Research Faculty



Carter Bermingham
Social Scientist &
Research Associate



Elena Bigart
Social Scientist &
Research Associate



Kika Bradford
Social Scientist and
Research Associate



Kara Grau
Assistant Director of
Economic Analysis



Glenna Hartman
Program Assistant &
Qualitative Specialist



Matthew Pettigrew
Data Engineer & Research
Associate



Megan Schultz
Project Manager & Research
Associate



Rachel Shouse
Communications Director



Glenna Tawney
Research Project Director &
Event Manager



Ava Worbets
Graduate Student



Emma Keinath-Lopez
Graduate Student

ITRR ONGOING RESEARCH PROJECTS

Quarterly Nonresident Analysis

Quarterly Resident Analysis

Annual Economic Impacts and Outlook

Tourism and Recreation Monitoring

State Park Visitation

Survey Kits



2023-24 TAC RESEARCH PROJECTS

Yellowstone Flood Recovery & Resiliency

Tourists' Preferences for Stargazing in Eastern MT

Impacts of Short-term Rentals in Montana

Montana Agritourism & Recreation: 20 Years Later

Recreation Access (Cooke City/Silver Gate)

Understanding Eastern Montana Visitor

2024-25 TAC RESEARCH PROJECTS

Montana's Paleontological Tourism

Contributions and Impacts of Montana Museums

Impacts of Montana Meetings and Conventions

A Study of Flathead Lake Level Impacts on the Tourism Economy

Understanding Reservoir Recreation (Canyon Ferry)

Montana's Outfitting Industry

Understanding Tourist Disengagement with Montana

ITRR DATA DASHBOARDS (PUBLICLY AVAILABLE)



Nonresident Survey Full Data Summary

Dive in to complete customizable access to summary percentages from our complete nonresident survey.



Nonresident Survey Mailback Crosstabs

Examine how trip characteristics like Activities or Sites Visited on trip vary across cross-sections of nonresident visitors.



Visitor Trends Nonresident Visitation

Learn how many nonresidents visit Montana by examining visitation trends.







Resident Survey National Park Visitation Q1, 2023

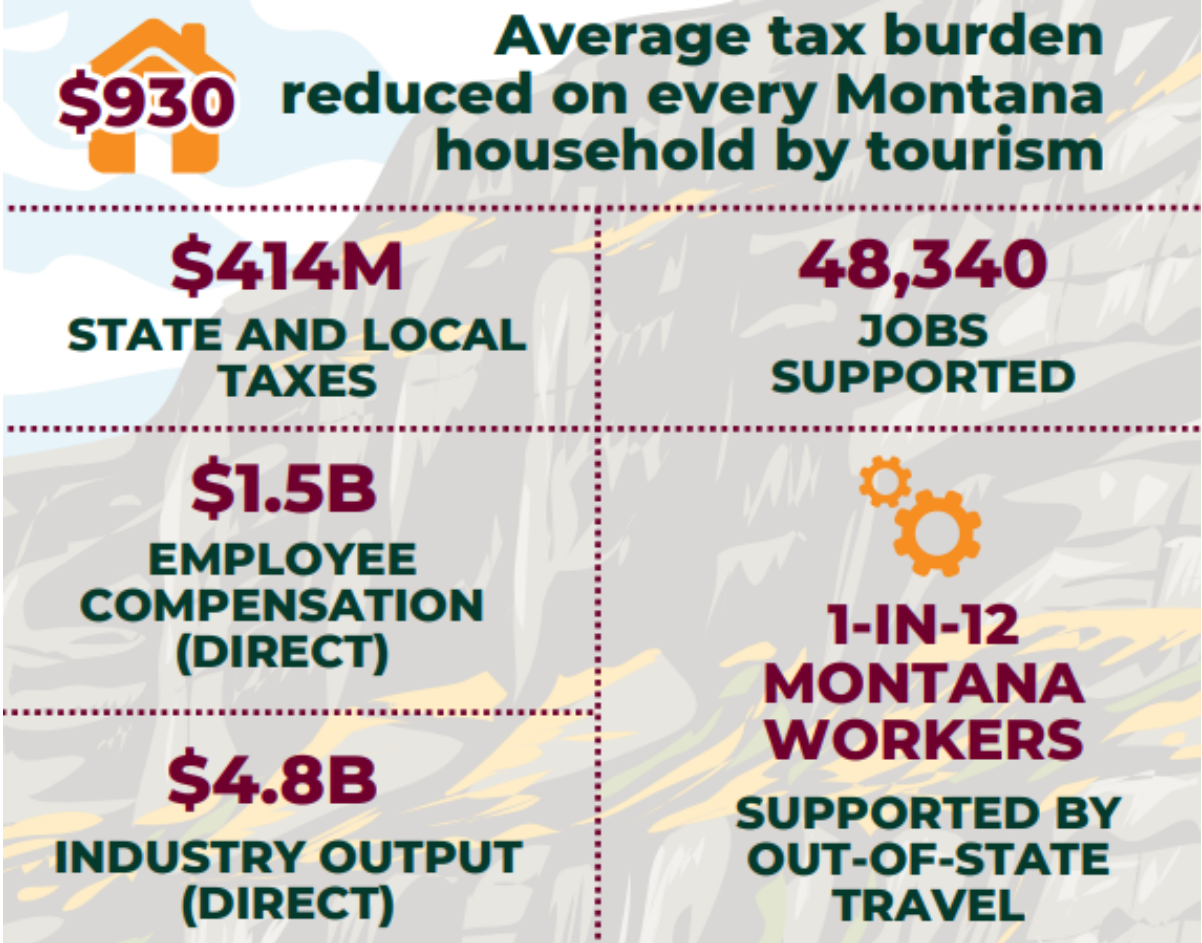
Our most recent resident report from Q1, 2023 highlights Montana residents' visitation to Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks.

<https://www.umt.edu/tourism-recreation-research/interactive-data/>

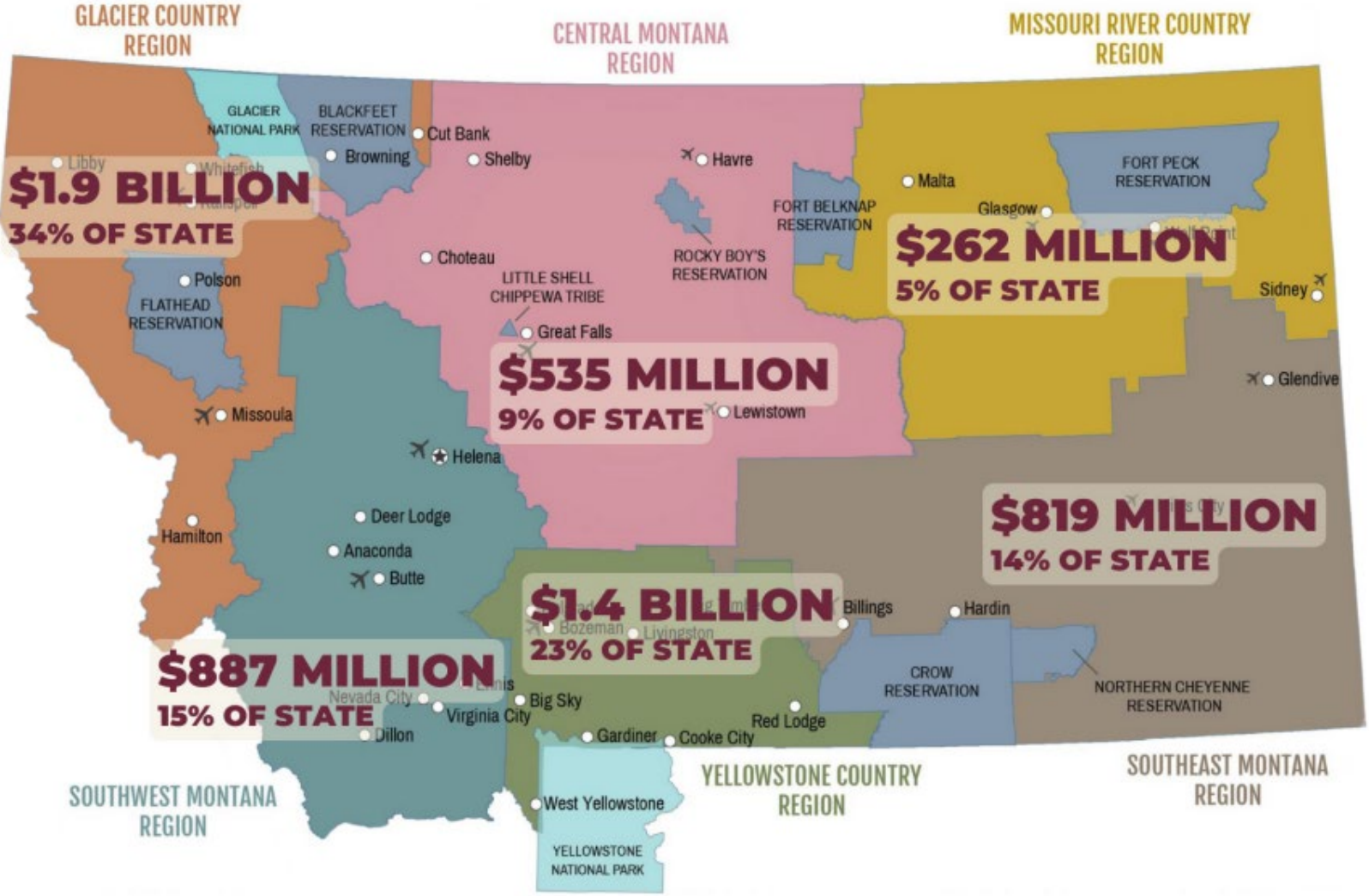
MONTANA TRAVEL INDUSTRY OVERVIEW

Year	Nonresident Visitors
2023	12,567,000
2022	12,409,000
2021	12,840,000
2020	11,202,000
2019	12,585,000

Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
			



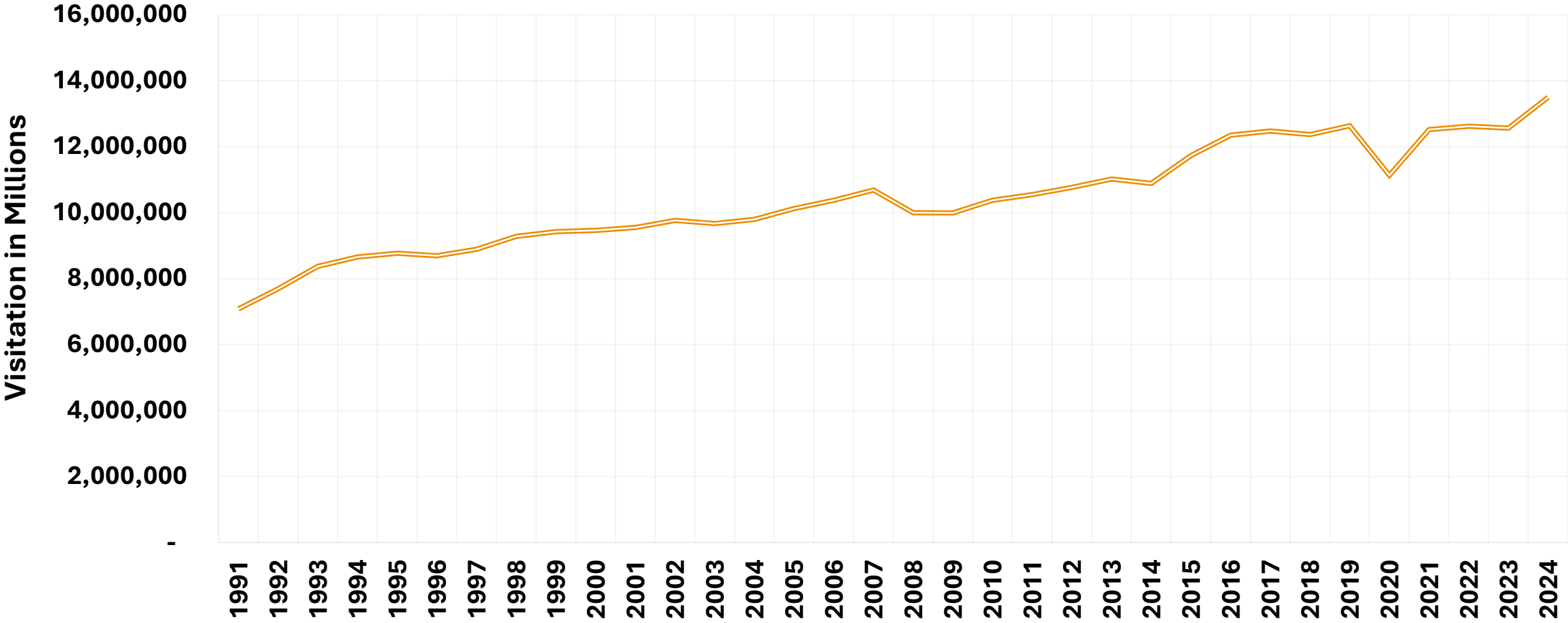
MONTANA TRAVEL SPENDING BY REGIONS 2022/23



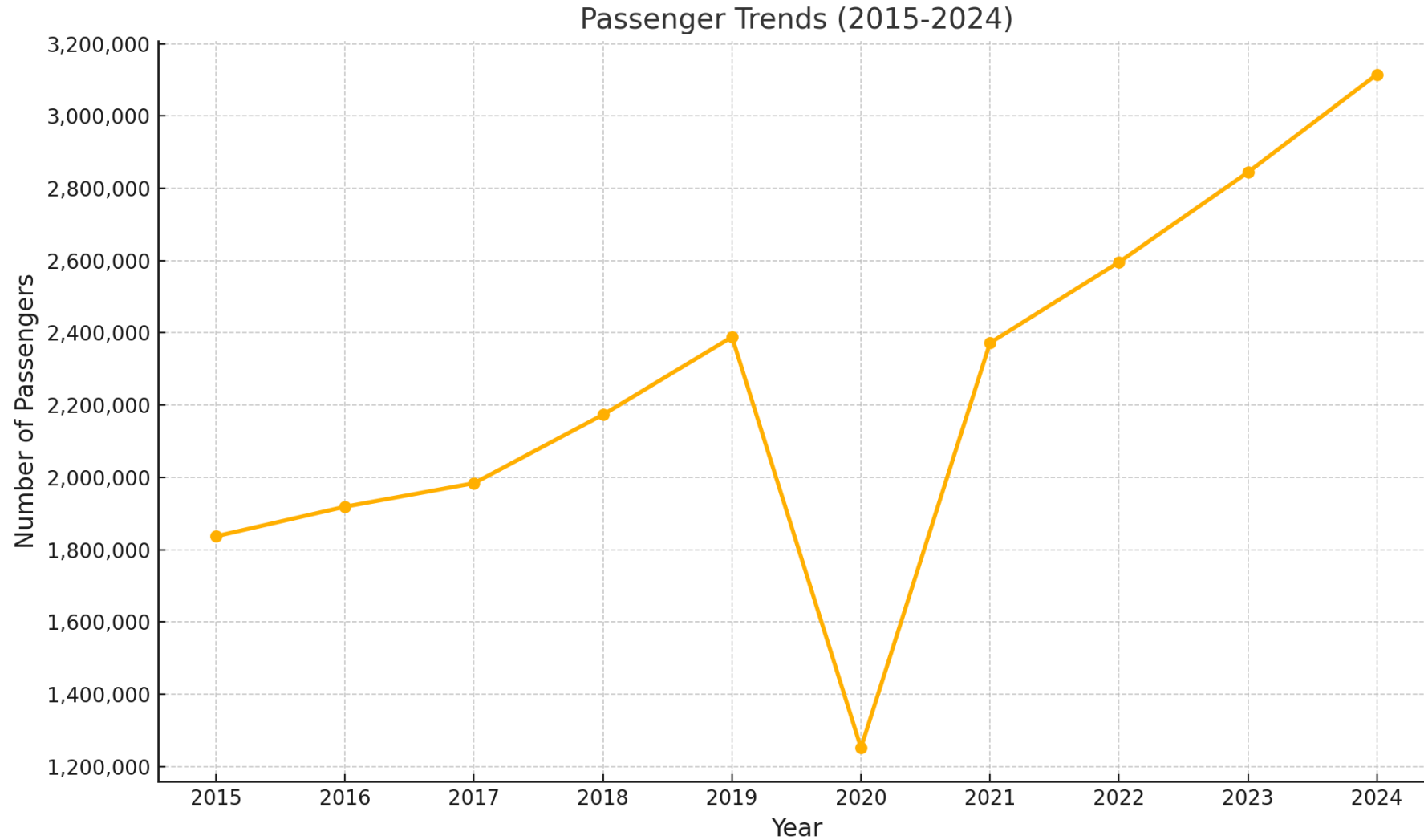
MONTANA VISITOR PROFILE

- Average Nights Spent = 5
- 74% Repeat Visitors
- 48% Couples
- 55% Male
- 70% Enter by Driving
- 55-74 Years Old; Largest Age Groups
- 90% Report Satisfied/Very Satisfied with a Feeling of Being Welcomed
- Top Sites Visited
 - Yellowstone NP = 29%
 - Glacier NP = 24%
 - Hot Springs = 8%
 - Montana State Parks = 6%
- Top Reason
 - Vacation/Recreation = 40%
 - Passing through = 26%
 - Visiting Friends/Family = 22%
- Top Visiting States:
 - ID, WA, ND & WY

MONTANA NONRESIDENT VISITATION TRENDS



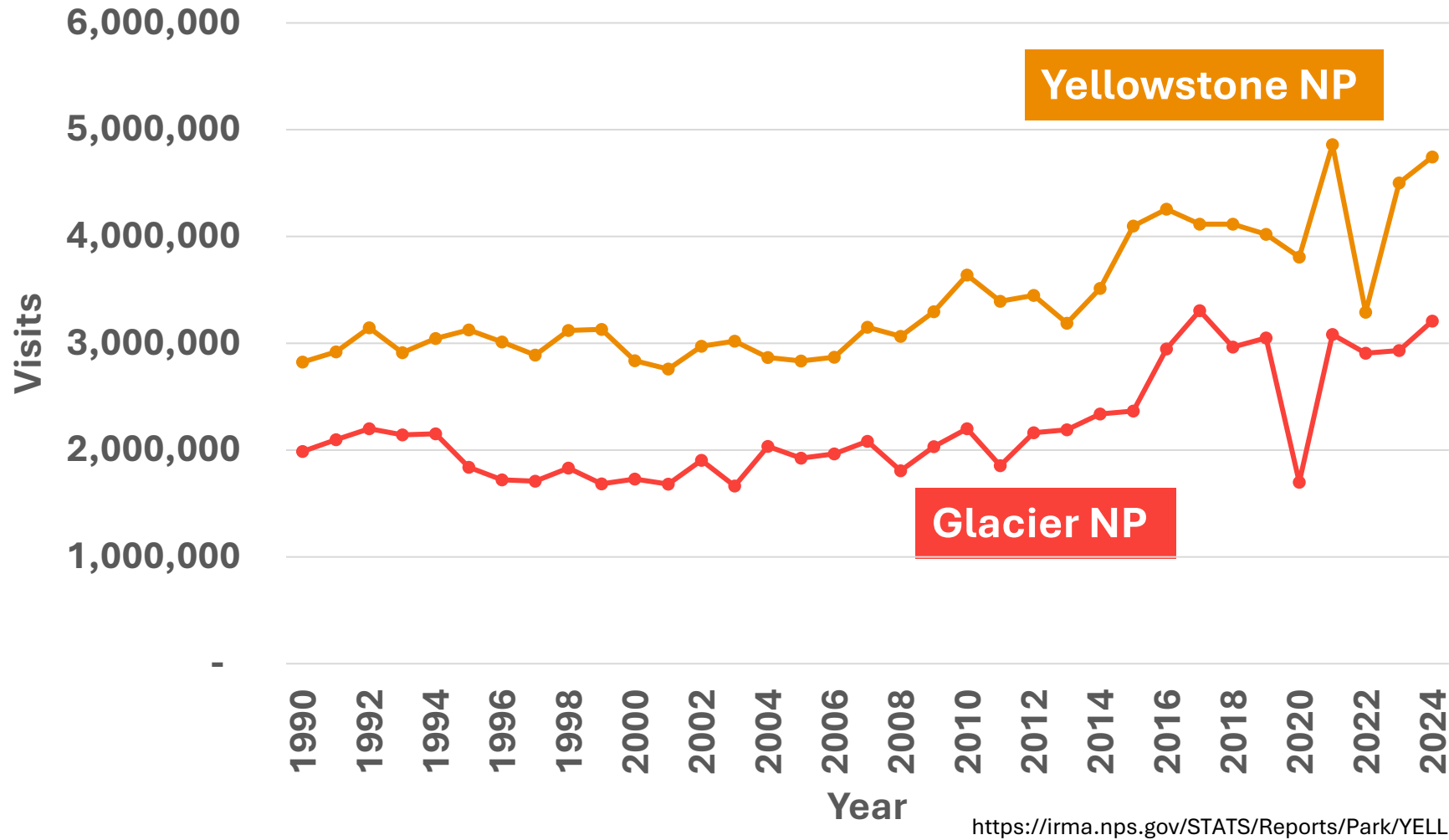
AIRPORT DEBOARDINGS – 2015-2024



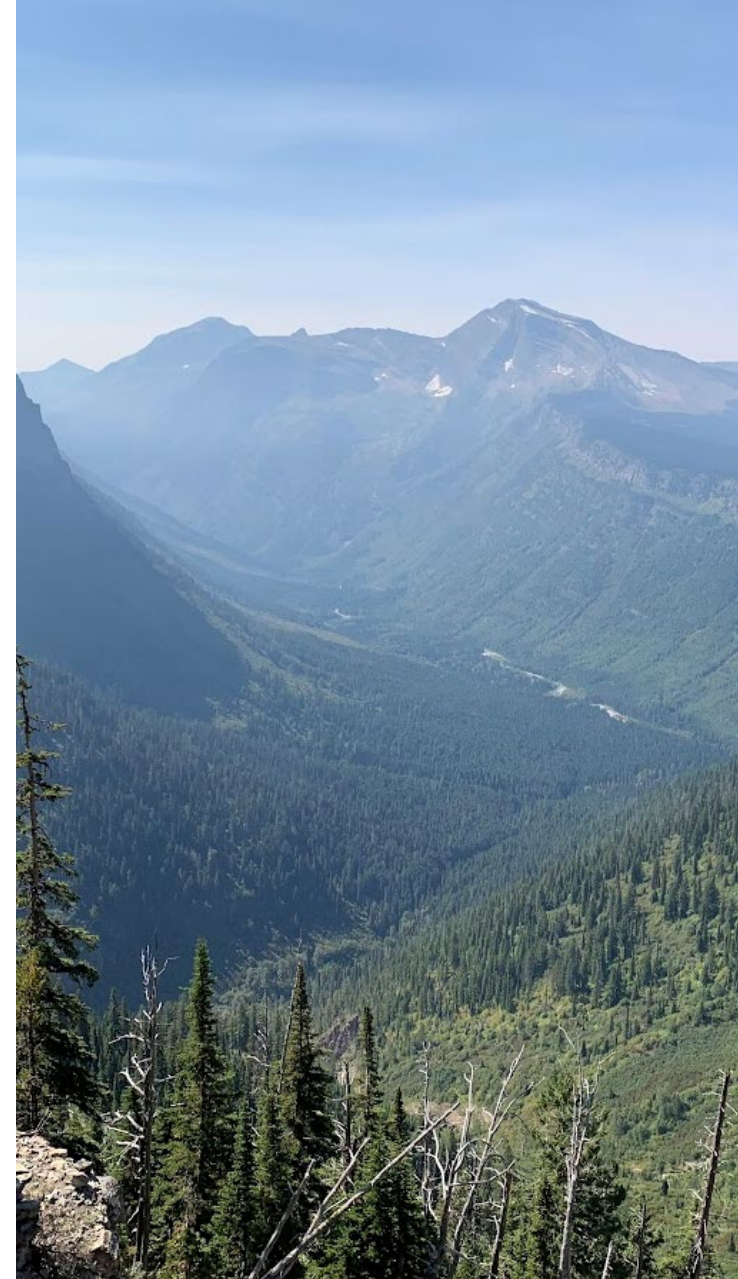
OUTDOOR RECREATION ECONOMY

- In 2023, the economic impact of outdoor recreation nationwide is \$1.2 trillion, with employment for 5 million jobs
- The Montana outdoor industry grew 7.2% in 2023
- Montana's outdoor recreation sector contributed \$3.4 billion in 2023
- Montana's outdoor recreation economy accounted for 4.6% of the state's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2023, ranking it third in the nation for contribution to state GDP, tied with Alaska and behind only Hawaii and Vermont, according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA)

NATIONAL PARK VISITATION 1990-2024



<https://irma.nps.gov/STATS/Reports/Park/YELL>



MONTANA PUBLIC LAND VISITATION



Year	State Park Visitation (55 Parks)	National Park Sites	Visitation 2023
2023	3,108,268	Yellowstone NP	4.5 Million
2022	3,036,121	Glacier NP	2.93 Million
2021	3,381,507	Little Bighorn Battlefield NM	227,000
2020	3,427,555	Bighorn Canyon NRA	218,000
2019	2,646,886	Big Hole NB	55,000
2018	2,572,890	Grant-Kohrs Ranch NHS	27,000
2017	2,544,138		

MONTANA TOURISM BUSINESS OWNER SURVEY RESULTS

2024 Business Report

- 43% increased visitor volume
- 30% remained the same
- 27% decreased visitor volume
- 48% reported a worker shortage

2025 Business Outlook

- 87% expect customer volume to increase/stay the same

Opportunities

- Expand Shoulder Season
- Tourism Events
- Infrastructure & Marketing

Challenges

- Weather & Natural Disasters
- Economic Downturn
- Housing & Labor
- Tourism Saturation
- Political & Regulatory Issues

TOURISM BUSINESS OWNERS-USE OF AI

36% reported using AI

- Marketing/advertising: 35%
- Customer Services: 21%
- Data Analytics: 19%
- Choice Operations: 10%

How often do you use AI?

- Every day: 11%
- A few times a week: 17%
- A few times a month: 11%
- Rarely: 22.6%
- Never: 38.7%

Biggest Opportunities

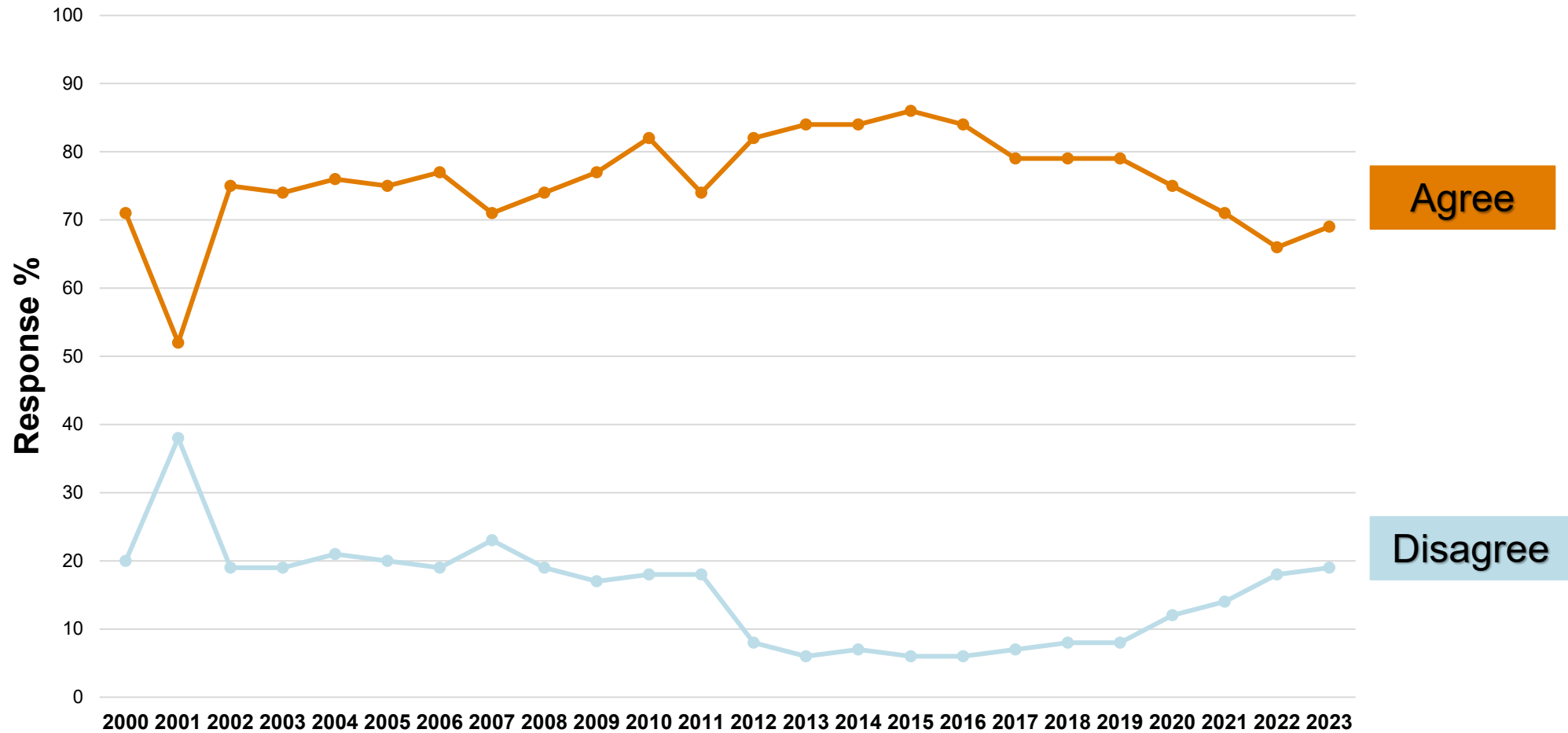
- Increased productivity: 27%
- Improved decision-making: 22%
- Enhanced customer service 20%

Greatest Challenges

- Lack of human interaction: 31%
- Lack of knowledge/expertise: 25%
- Privacy and data security 17%
- High cost of implementation: 14%
- Job displacement/automation 12%

RESIDENT ATTITUDES ON TOURISM

The overall benefits of tourism outweigh the negative impacts (2000-2023)



RESIDENT QUALITY OF LIFE & TOURISM PROSPERITY

Improved Amenities

Enhanced infrastructure like roads, restaurants, shopping, parks, and cultural facilities benefit residents.

Economic Benefits

Creates jobs, boosts incomes, and diversifies the economy.

Sustainable Management

Sustainable tourism development, marketing, and management.

Lifestyle Improvements & Quality of Life
Well-managed tourism supports quality of life without overwhelming resources.

Source: Adapted from (Cucculelli & Goffi, [Citation2016](#); Devi, [Citation2015](#); Fritz & Koch, [Citation2014](#), [Citation2016](#); Nunthasiriphon, [Citation2015](#); Yigitcanlar et al., [Citation2015](#)).

2025 TOURISM OUTLOOK & TRENDS

Outlook

- Strong and steady visitation
- 87% of tourism business owners stated they anticipate visitor/customer volume to increase or stay the same
- Shoulder season opportunity
- Environmental & economic concerns

Trends

Immersive Travel
Sustainable Tourism
Health and Wellness
Slow Travel
Music Festivals
Detour Destinations
Ski Resort Investment
Last-Chance Tourism

SAVE THE DATE



OCTOBER 21-23, 2025 BILLINGS, MT

HOSTED BY:



INSTITUTE FOR
TOURISM & RECREATION
RESEARCH



W.A. FRANKE
COLLEGE OF FORESTRY
AND CONSERVATION

QUESTIONS?

Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research
itr@umontana.edu



@itrumontana 