



# Winter Study, Use and Users of the Vasa Pathway



## Introduction

The Vasa Pathway is an unpaved multi-use, non-motorized trail located amidst the Pere Marquette state forest. The Pathway is utilized by cross-country skiers, mountain bikers, walkers and naturalists and features a series of loops and trails that offer routes for all levels of user. To better understand trail use and users, a winter study was conducted by Traverse Area Recreation and Transportation (TART) Trails in cooperation with researchers from the *Department of Park, Recreation and Tourism Resources at Michigan State University*. On-site trail observation coupled with a self-administered survey of randomly selected trail users was conducted from January 12, 2003 through March 13, 2003.

## Methods

Trail use was observed at its only major trailhead access point on systematically selected days and times during the study period. Traverse Area Recreation and Transportation Trails volunteers were positioned adjacent to the trail and counted all individuals going one direction, classifying them as adults or children and noting their mode of travel (bike, in-line skating, foot or other). Observations were then extrapolated to estimate use for the January through March period, using the assumption (and actual condition) that snow was present for outdoor winter recreation. At ten-minute intervals during three hour observation periods, a volunteer would select the next adult passing and interview him/her or ask him/her to respond to a self-administered one-page questionnaire. The minimum number of surveys administered was three per observation period and the maximum was 20. During the study period, 272 surveys were distributed on the Vasa Pathway, with 237 (88%) completed and returned.

Survey data provides two important measures. When considering respondents, this information provides accurate information about uses, but it is not representative of distinct individual users, as those who visit more frequently are more likely to be sampled and to be asked to complete a survey. However, the data was weighted to account for this frequent use bias, and the characteristics of distinct users/visitors were also assessed. This report is organized by first describing levels of use based on observations, then describing characteristics of uses/uses based on unweighted survey data and finally, characteristics of segments of distinct users/visitors based on weighted survey data.

## Observation Highlights

- The Vasa Pathway had 9,646 estimated uses with 4,748 weekday uses and 4,898 weekend uses from January 12 through March 13, 2003. Based on 9,646 extrapolated observations, there were 9,282 (96%) ski uses and 297 (3%) snowshoe uses. There were 8,815 (91%) adult uses and 831 (9%) child uses.

## Use Highlights from Surveys

- The majority (80%) of Vasa uses were by Traverse City area seasonal or full-time residents. They made up approximately one-half (49%) of distinct users.
- More than half (58%) of the Vasa uses were by visitors who participated in solo trail activities.
- More than half (60%) of the use was by people who were between 41 and 60 years old, of these 63% were males and 37% females, and almost one-quarter (23%) of the use was by people who were between 19 to 40 years old, of which 63% were males and 37% females.
- One-fourth (26%) of the uses were by people that traveled four miles or less to reach the trail.
- The majority of uses (91%) were rated as highly satisfactory.

## Distinct User Highlights from Surveys

- Two-thirds of distinct trail users (67%) had contributed support to TART Trails and well over half (58%) would like to become a Friend of Traverse Area Recreation and Transportation Trails or were already members of the organization.
- One half (51%) of the distinct users were tourists who did not either reside full-time in the Traverse City area nor did they own a seasonal home in the Traverse City area and they accounted for nearly one-fifth (20%) of trail uses on the Vasa Pathway. Tourists were further surveyed on the trail, however only five individuals responded with the follow up tourist information, so tourist statistics were not compiled for the Vasa Pathway.

## Trail Use Estimates and Characteristics

### Use Estimates

The Vasa Pathway had 9,646 estimated uses with 4,748 weekday uses and 4,898 weekend uses from January 12 through March 13, 2003. Uses observed and extrapolated from observations included 9,282 (96%) ski uses and 297 (3%) snowshoe uses. There were 8,815 (91%) adult uses and 831 (9%) child uses.

### Vasa Use Activities and Access

Survey data suggested Vasa Pathway uses were mostly for recreation (58%) or for the purpose of exercise (24%). The remaining uses were for training for a race (17%) and other (1%). The majority (91%) of uses on the Pathway were rated as highly satisfactory (on a scale of 1-9 with “9” being highly satisfied and “1” being highly dissatisfied), with 70 % being rated “9” and 21% “8.” The remaining 9% were rated ranging from “5” (neutral) to “7.” Most uses (36%) were by people who traveled five miles or less to reach the Vasa Pathway. Two-thirds (69%) of the users traveled ten miles or less to reach the trail, including one- third (33%) who traveled between five and ten miles to reach the trail.

### Demographics

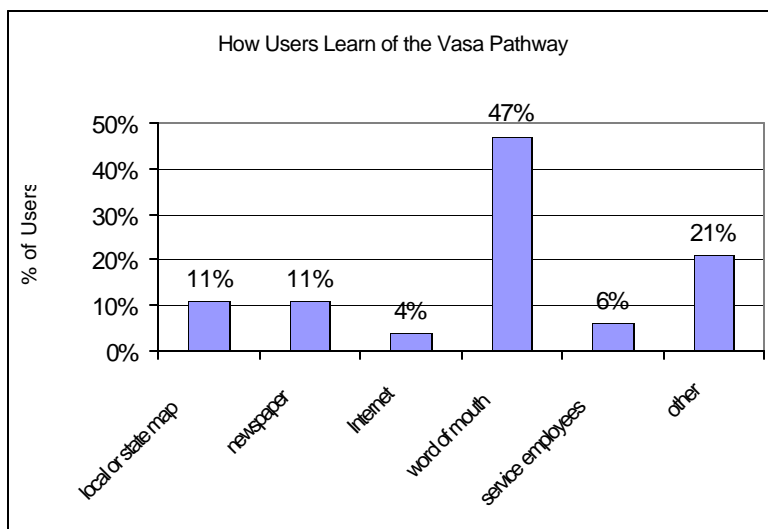
Over half (58%) of the use was by solo trail participants, while the average group size was two. The majority (60%) of use was by people who were 41 to 60 years old, of which 63% were males and 37% females. This was followed by 22% of use by people who were 19 to 40 years old, of which 63% were males and 37% females. Nine percent of use was by people who were 61 years of age or older, of these 81% were males and 19% were females. The remaining 9% of use was by youth under the age of 18; of these 65% were males and 35% females.

### Tourist Data

Tourist uses, by those who are not full-time or seasonal residents of the Traverse City area, accounted for 20% of the Vasa Trail uses. Tourist uses were more likely to be for exercise (82 % vs. 24%) and somewhat less likely to be for training for a race (18% vs. 17%) than other uses. One hundred percent of tourist uses were rated as highly satisfactory, with 59% receiving the highest rating (“9”) and 30% receiving the next highest rating (“8”). Tourists uses tended to last longer than non-tourists with an average use time of 2.6 hours, over 1.4 segments. The largest proportion of tourist uses (60%) was by those 41 through 60 years. Only 11% of tourist parties had children (18 and under).

## Distinct Trail User Characteristics

### Source of Discovery of the Vasa Pathway



Half (47%) of distinct trail users first learned of the Vasa Pathway by word of mouth from friends or relatives. One-tenth (11%) learned about the trail from the newspaper and another one-tenth (11%) from a local or state map. Other users surveyed learned of the trail from service employees (6%) or from the Internet (4%). Almost one-quarter (21%) of users found out about the trail by other means, such as: participating in special events like the Vasa Race and the Iceman Bike Race; being residents in the area; through club memberships, via the Michigan Trail Book or the Internet.

### **Vasa Surveyed Users' Trail Activities Over the Past Twelve Months**

Of the distinct Vasa users surveyed, almost all (99%) of them had used the trail in the previous year. The majority (84%) were infrequent users (using the trail ten or less times per year) and 16% were frequent users (more than ten times per year). Over the 12 months prior to the day they were sampled, distinct Vasa users participated in a variety of activities on the Vasa Pathway including bicycling, skiing, walking, running, and walking dogs. One-fourth (25%) bicycled, 8% ran, 9% walked, 2% walked the dog, 1% had used the trail for wheelchair activities, and 99% had used the trail for winter activities including skiing and snowshoeing. For those participating in an activity, bicyclists averaged a mean of 3 uses per year, runners 2 uses per year, walkers 1 use per year, and skiers 3 uses per year.

Vasa users were also asked about their trail use on both the Tart and Leelanau trails. Thirty-two percent of the distinct Vasa users had used the Tart trail, while 26% had used the Leelanau trail in the past 12 months. The majority of users on both trails were infrequent users, with 85 % of the Tart trail users and 92% of Leelanau trail users being infrequent users. For those participating in an activity on the Tart trail, bicyclists averaged a mean of 10 uses per year, runners 2 uses per year, walkers 1 use per year, and in-line skaters 1 use per year. For those participating in an activity on the Leelanau trail, bicyclists averaged a mean of 2 uses per year, runners 1 use per year, and in-line skaters 1 use per year.

### **How Far Trail Users Traveled**

Of the distinct Vasa users who traveled to reach the trail, more than two-thirds (68%) traveled ten miles or less from their home or lodging facility to reach the trail. Ten percent of users traveled more than 30 miles to reach the trail. The average distance traveled per distinct trail user was 18 miles, with the most common user coming from 8 miles away.

### **Trail Involvement**

When asked about trail involvement, two-thirds of the distinct trail users (67%) had contributed support to Traverse Area Recreation and Transportation Trails and half (58%) would like to become a Friend of Traverse Area Recreation and Transportation Trails or were already members of the organization.

### **Event Participation**

When asked about participation in events held on the Vasa Trail, three-fourths (76%) of the distinct trail users indicated that they had participated in the Subaru North America Vasa event. Twenty-one percent of the distinct female trail users indicated that they had participated in the Subaru Women's Ski Tour.

### **Skill Levels**

Half (49%) of distinct Vasa users surveyed described their skill level as moderate. This was closely followed by novice (23%) and expert (19%) classifications. A smaller amount (9%) of Vasa users described themselves as beginners/first-timers.

### **User Suggestions**

Users were asked in an open-ended format to suggest an improvement to the Vasa or an extension they would like to see. Sixty-seven percent of distinct users had a suggestion and 33% provided no suggestion. Those users who provided suggestions were segmented three ways: 1) frequent vs. infrequent users, (frequent users – more than ten Vasa uses in 12 months prior to being surveyed and infrequent users – less or equal than ten uses); 2) residents vs. tourists (residents – those with a primary or seasonal home in the Traverse City area and tourists – those without a primary or seasonal home in the Traverse City area); and 3) supporters vs. others (supporters – those who reported contributing support to the trail, and others – those who did not report contributing support to the trail.)

Frequent vs. Infrequent Users

*Improvements:* Approximately one-fourth (29%) of frequent users suggesting an improvement wanted additional signage on the Vasa Pathway. The next highest suggested improvement was to make a permanent 50k loop (9%). Infrequent users also suggested additional signage as their number one improvement (15%), with an improved warming hut area (9%) being listed secondly.

*Extensions:* Frequent users were most in favor of an extension in any direction (66%), with a connection to the Leelanau trail being most frequently noted (33%). Infrequent users sighted an extension in any direction (84%) as their most wanted extension.

Residents vs. Tourists

*Improvements:* Residents also recommended increased signage (13%) as their most wanted improvement. Residents wanted to see the Leelanau trail paved (11%) as the second most wanted improvement. The most noted improvement noted among tourists was for increased signage (18%). Next most noted was for an improved warming hut area (11%).

*Extensions:* Most residents suggesting extensions reported non-specified extensions, with the Tart to Leelanau extension being noted the most frequent. Other extensions noted were: to Bunker Hill, to Suttons Bay, and north to Elk Rapids. All tourists suggesting extensions (7%) reported non-specific extensions.

Supporters vs Other Users

*Improvements:* The number one improvement wanted by supporters of the Vasa Trail was for increased signage (17%). Also noted were widening the trail (8%), paving the parking lot area (7%), and paving the Leelanau Trail (7%). All other users suggested more signage (13%), more drinking fountains (13%), an improved warming hut area (13%), and classical skiing tracks (13%) as their most wanted improvements.

*Extensions:* One-fourth (24%) of the supporters suggesting extensions wanted a connection between the Vasa Pathway and the TART Trail. All other users suggesting extensions reported non-specific extensions.

January, 2005. By Christine A. Vogt, Ph.D., Josh Pedesen, Afke van der Woud, Pamela Kirbach, Nicole Dunn, & Charles Nelson, Ph.D. For more information contact Missy Luyk at Traverse Area Recreation & Transportation Trails Inc., ph.231 941 4300 (missy@traversetrails.org.) or Christine Vogt at Michigan State University, ph 517 432-0318 (vogtc@msu.edu).