

THE STATE OF
BUSHWALKING
IN AUSTRALIA
2026

Participation, places, patterns
and the future of one of Australia's
largest outdoor recreation activities



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Prepared by Trail Hiking Australia
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Executive Summary

Bushwalking is one of Australia's largest outdoor recreation activities, with recent data showing an increase in adult participation

Bushwalking is a defining part of Australia's relationship with the outdoors. Each year, millions of Australians walk through forests, national parks, reserves and other natural landscapes for recreation, health, connection and enjoyment.

The latest AusPlay participation data (January-December 2025) shows that almost 4 million Australian adults (3.95 million) participated in bushwalking in the past year, representing 17.5% of the adult population. This is up from 16.9% the year before, an increase of roughly 212,000 adult participants. Further annual releases will be needed to determine whether this represents a sustained trend.

Unlike many traditional sports, bushwalking does not depend primarily on purpose-built venues, competition structures or membership organisations. Around 12.5% of adult bushwalking participation is classified as organised, through clubs, groups, community organisations or private and commercial businesses. Most participation occurs informally, including walking independently, with friends and family, or through less formal group arrangements. Organised participation is an important part of the picture, but it is not the foundation on which bushwalking participation rests.

The defining feature of bushwalking is that the landscape itself is the foundation of participation.

Bushwalking is supported by three connected economies

Australia's walking landscape supports several overlapping forms of participation.

The resident participation economy

This is the broadest participation base and the principal focus of AusPlay. It includes Australian residents who bushwalk informally as well as those participating through organised pathways.

AusPlay provides valuable insight into this group, including participation levels, demographics, behaviours, locations and expenditure patterns.

The organised services economy

Around 12.5% of resident bushwalking participation captured by AusPlay is classified as organised, including clubs, groups, community organisations and private or commercial businesses.

AusPlay captures some participation through private or commercial businesses, but this should not be interpreted as a measure of the complete guided walking industry.

The walking tourism economy

Walking tourism includes domestic and international visitors, guided experiences, multi-day walking holidays and tourism businesses built around outdoor experiences.

AusPlay may capture Australian residents who bushwalk while travelling domestically, but it cannot identify that activity separately as tourism. Its participation estimates exclude overseas visitors and do not measure bookings, visitor nights, operator revenue or trail-specific visitation.

Despite these differences, all three rely on the same underlying asset:

Australia's natural landscapes.

Public landscapes are the essential infrastructure of bushwalking

The latest data demonstrates that bushwalking is overwhelmingly a landscape-based activity. AusPlay identifies public space as the principal recorded setting for participation, but it does not identify which parks or trails were used, and geographic classifications refer to where participants live rather than where they walked.

This has important implications for future planning.

Supporting bushwalking is not simply a matter of building more infrastructure or increasing visitor numbers. It requires maintaining the environmental quality, accessibility and resilience of the landscapes that make walking experiences possible.

Bushwalking creates value beyond participation numbers

AusPlay records several strong motivations associated with bushwalking. Among adults considering participation, the most commonly cited reasons were being outdoors and enjoying nature (59%), fun and enjoyment (48%), and physical health or fitness (40%).

These motivations point to bushwalking's potential value for health, wellbeing, social connection and engagement with nature, but AusPlay does not directly measure those outcomes. Establishing them requires external public health and wellbeing research.

AusPlay estimates that Australian adults spent approximately \$291 million annually within the paid-participation categories it measures, including registration, membership and venue or access fees. Only 14.9% of adult bushwalking participants, approximately 568,700 people, reported paid participation. Among those participants, median annual expenditure was \$60 and mean expenditure was \$512.

These figures exclude equipment, clothing, transport, food, accommodation and broader tourism spending. They should therefore not be interpreted as the total size of the bushwalking economy or the walking visitor economy.

Participation opportunities and inclusion priorities

Growth in overall adult participation sits alongside some findings that deserve closer attention. In the January-December 2025 annual tables, participation remains close to 20% from ages 25 to 64 before declining to 9.6% among adults aged 65 and over. In the aggregated report covering data collected from July 2023 onwards, participation also rises strongly with household income, while adults with disability participate at 12.0% compared with 18.6% among adults without disability; both of these measures use an adult 18+ base.

The same aggregated report records participation at 11.5% among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults and 16.4% among people who speak a language other than English at home, also using an adult 18+ base.

Organised, out-of-school participation among children declined from 76,194 in 2024 to 53,776 in 2025. Because the measure excludes informal family activity and is based on a smaller sample, this should be treated as an early signal rather than evidence of a confirmed decline in children's total bushwalking participation.

These lower rates justify closer investigation of potential barriers and more targeted inclusion efforts, particularly among older Australians, lower-income households, people with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people who speak a language other than English at home, and children and families.

Planning for the future

The challenge for Australia is not simply increasing the number of people who walk. It is ensuring that the landscapes supporting millions of walking experiences remain healthy, accessible and resilient.

Future planning should:

- treat landscapes and trail networks as core recreation infrastructure
- prioritise maintenance, rehabilitation and condition monitoring before expansion, particularly where existing networks are deteriorating
- design information, grading, signage and safety systems for independent walkers as well as organised participants
- invest in judgement, prevention and current information alongside rescue capability
- match participation, visitation, tourism and ecological data to the questions each can genuinely answer
- support inclusion through responses tailored to different communities and needs

- support responsible walking tourism without treating commercial growth as evidence of resident recreation need
- involve Traditional Owners as decision-makers in matters affecting Country
- protect the environmental quality, sense of place and meaningful public access that make bushwalking valuable

Bushwalking demonstrates that recreation and conservation are not competing objectives. The landscapes Australians value for recreation are the same landscapes that require careful stewardship.

Australians do not go bushwalking because of infrastructure alone.

They go because of the places they can walk.

Protecting those places is therefore fundamental to the future of bushwalking in Australia.

Three Bushwalking Economies

Different people, same landscape

Bushwalking looks like a single activity from the outside. In practice, it operates through three connected economies: the broad participation economy among Australian residents, the organisations and businesses that support some of that participation, and the visitor economy generated when people travel to walk. Distinguishing between them is essential to interpreting the evidence correctly and avoiding two common policy errors: treating all bushwalking as commercial activity, or assuming informal participation requires no public support.

1. The resident participation economy

This is the broadest of the three, and the principal focus of this report. AusPlay measures participation among Australian residents, including both informal activity and some participation organised through clubs, community organisations and businesses.

It encompasses Australian residents who bushwalk, whether independently, informally, or through an organised pathway:

- **Informal resident participation.** Walking alone, with friends and family, or through loosely organised groups, with no club, business or formal program directing the activity.
- **Organised resident participation.** Walking through a club, community organisation, gym or fitness provider, individual guide or trainer, or private or commercial business.

AusPlay data shows that informal participation accounts for the large majority of resident bushwalking activity, with around 12.5% classified as organised. This is the economy of people walking a local reserve after work, a family taking a weekend track together, or a bushwalking club running a scheduled trip.

Because informal participation has no membership rolls, no ticketing data and no central register, AusPlay's household survey methodology is one of the only tools capable of measuring it at national scale, which is precisely why it is the evidentiary backbone of this report.

What AusPlay tells us about this economy: participation rates, demographics, frequency, duration, location, motivation, organisation type, and self-reported expenditure, for both informal and organised resident participation.

What it cannot tell us: trail-level usage, seasonal patterns, or the condition of the landscapes this economy depends on.

2. The organised services and participation economy

This dimension includes both the residents who participate through a structured pathway, and the organisations and businesses that deliver those opportunities: bushwalking clubs, recreation associations, community organisations, gyms and fitness providers, individual guides or trainers, and private or commercial businesses offering organised walking activities.

Around 12.5% of resident bushwalking participation is organised in this way. This economy includes long-standing bushwalking clubs with decades of trip-leading experience, out-of-school youth programs, community group activities, and commercial operators running scheduled walks, day tours or short courses. It is an important setting for structured safety education, group leadership and skills development, although it reaches only a minority of overall participation.

Organised services are not exclusive to residents. The same clubs, guides and commercial operators that support resident participation also support visitors, which is one of the ways this economy connects to the walking visitor economy described below.

AusPlay records some of this economy directly: it asks respondents whether their bushwalking was organised, and through what type of entity. This is a genuine strength of the dataset, but it comes with an important boundary.

What AusPlay tells us about this economy: the proportion of resident participation organised through each entity type, and basic demographics of who participates this way.

What it cannot tell us: the number of guided tours or programs delivered, operator revenue, business numbers, or the quality or safety standards of what is delivered. A commercial operator appearing in AusPlay's "private or commercial business" category is indistinguishable from a single paid session and a multi-day guided trek. The data records that organisation occurred, not its scale or character.

3. The walking visitor economy

The third dimension sits largely outside AusPlay's scope. It includes domestic visitors travelling to walk a specific region or trail, international visitors, multi-day guided walking holidays, accommodation-linked walking packages, and the tourism businesses, regional economies and marketing bodies built around these experiences.

This is a significant part of Australia's outdoor sector, but its scale cannot be established from AusPlay. Iconic multi-day walks, guided alpine experiences, and regional walking trails all draw visitors whose spending supports local businesses well beyond the cost of the walk itself. It is also the dimension most visible to tourism bodies and regional development agencies, because

it generates the kind of commercial data (bookings, accommodation nights, visitor spend) that resident participation does not.

The walking visitor economy connects to the organised services economy directly: many visitors access bushwalking through the same guides, clubs and commercial operators that also serve residents. It can also touch the resident participation economy, since AusPlay may capture Australian residents who happen to bushwalk while travelling domestically, though the survey cannot identify or separate that activity as tourism.

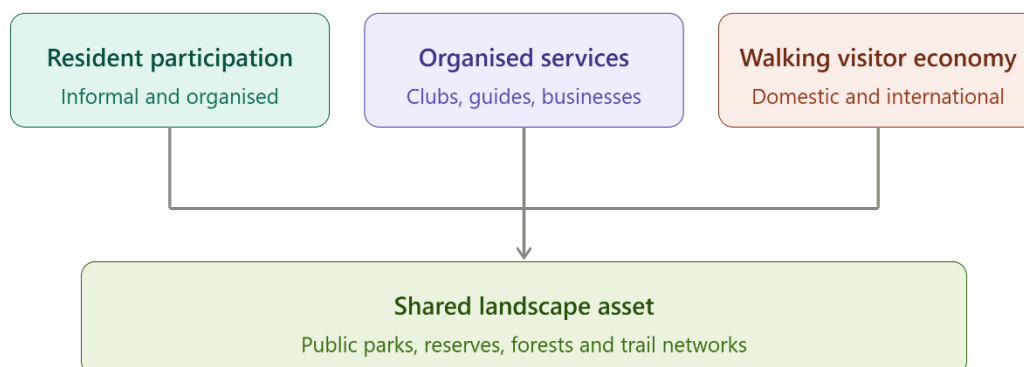
AusPlay is a survey of Australian residents. By design, its participation estimates exclude overseas visitors.

What AusPlay tells us about this economy: it provides some background on resident participation, including participation organised through commercial businesses, but it does not separately identify walking tourism or measure tourism demand, supply or visitation.

What is needed to measure it properly: Tourism Research Australia's National and International Visitor Surveys, state and territory tourism data, park-level visitation figures, and operator-reported data.

The same landscape, underneath all three

These three economies are not competing markets. They are overlapping systems built around the same finite resource.



Organised services support participation within both the resident and visitor economies, which is why they sit between the two rather than beneath only one. Most resident participation remains informal and never touches the organised services economy at all. A person walking alone on a Saturday morning, a club group navigating an overnight route, a family on a commercial day tour, and an international visitor completing a multi-day guided trek are all drawing on the same trails, the same track surfaces, the same signage, and the same natural landscapes. None of these forms of participation is more legitimate than another. All of them depend on the health, accessibility and resilience of the same underlying asset.

This is the report's central organising idea. It reframes the usual policy question, "how do we grow bushwalking," into the more useful one this report is built to answer: **what will it take to keep the landscapes supporting all three economies healthy, accessible and resilient?**

What is bushwalking?

Defining the activity behind the numbers

Before presenting the data in detail, it is worth being precise about what "bushwalking" actually covers in this report. The term is used loosely in everyday language, but AusPlay applies a specific classification and reporting framework, and understanding it prevents the numbers in later sections from being misread.

AusPlay's classification

AusPlay divides all activity into two broad groups: **sport-related activities** (team sports, running, swimming, cycling and similar activities typically linked to National Sporting Organisations) and **non-sport-related physical activities**. Bushwalking sits in the second group, alongside activities such as gym and fitness training and recreational dance.

This classification provides useful context for the report. AusPlay does not treat bushwalking as a traditional sport, and the participation patterns examined later, including its predominantly informal organisation and reliance on public landscapes, help explain why conventional sporting models do not readily apply.

Bushwalking as an umbrella term

In the aggregated AusPlay Power BI report covering data collected from July 2023 onwards, the "bush walking" activity category contains three reported sub-activities:

- **Bush walking** accounted for approximately 55.8% of sessions and 42.7% of total participation time. The average recorded session lasted 174 minutes.
- **Hiking** accounted for approximately 42.0% of sessions but 55.2% of total participation time, with an average recorded session lasting 312 minutes.
- **Virtual bush walking** accounted for approximately 2.2% of sessions and 2.1% of total participation time. The available tables do not provide enough information to define precisely what respondents included under this label.

The sub-activity participation percentages exceed 100% when combined, indicating that the categories overlap and should not be added together. "Bush walking" and "hiking" should therefore not be treated as separate participant populations; both sit within the broader activity category used for the overall participation estimates.

This report uses **bushwalking** as an umbrella term for the AusPlay activity category, covering bush walking, hiking and virtual bush walking, unless a distinction between its sub-activities is directly relevant to the point being made.

Note also that this sub-activity breakdown draws on the aggregated July 2023 onwards Power BI report, a different reporting period from the January-December 2025 annual participation tables used elsewhere in this report. This distinction is carried through into the methodology appendix.

Who is counted

AusPlay's bushwalking figures rest on two different population bases, and later sections depend on keeping them separate:

- **Adults (15+).** Participation is defined broadly: any bushwalking activity for sport, exercise or recreation in the past 12 months, whether informal or organised.
- **Children (0-14).** Participation is defined narrowly: organised bushwalking activity occurring outside school hours only, as reported by a parent or guardian. Informal bushwalking by children, such as a family walk, is not captured in the children's participation figures at all.

This asymmetry is significant. It is reasonable to expect that many children also experience bushwalking informally with parents, carers and family groups, but AusPlay does not quantify that activity. The organised-only estimate should therefore not be interpreted as the total number of Australian children who bushwalk.

The numbers

Establishing the scale

The latest AusPlay data, covering January to December 2025, shows that **3,953,952 Australian adults (15+) participated in bushwalking in the past year, a participation rate of 17.5%**. This places bushwalking among the largest individual physical-activity categories recorded by AusPlay, with a participation rate substantially higher than any individual organised team sport in the 2025 tables.

Among children (0-14), AusPlay's narrower, organised-only measure recorded **53,776 participants, a rate of 1.1%** of the child population.

The contrast between these two estimates reflects a difference in measurement rather than a simple difference in participation. Adult figures include informal and organised activity, while children are counted only when their participation is organised and occurs outside school hours.

Recent movement

Comparing the 2025 annual estimates with the equivalent 2024 tables shows year-on-year movement in opposite directions for adults and children.

Adults. The estimated participation rate rose from 16.9% in 2024 to 17.5% in 2025, equivalent to approximately 212,000 additional adult participants (from 3,741,509 to 3,953,952). This is a single year-on-year comparison and, as with any survey estimate, is subject to a margin of error. The result maintains bushwalking's position as one of the country's largest non-sport physical activities, although further annual releases will be needed to establish whether the increase represents a sustained trend.

Children. Organised participation fell from 1.58% in 2024 to 1.11% in 2025, a decline from 76,194 to 53,776 participants, a reduction of around 22,400. Because this is drawn from a smaller sample base than the adult figures, and covers only one year-on-year comparison, it should be treated as an early signal rather than a confirmed trend.

Demographics

Gender (adults, 2025). Participation is higher among women (18.6%, an estimated 2,126,762 participants) than men (16.3%, an estimated 1,808,265 participants).

Age (adults, 2025). Participation rises from the teenage years, peaks at 21.4% among adults aged 35-44, and remains close to 20% through to age 64 before declining sharply among adults aged 65 and over.

Age group	Participation rate	Estimated participants
15-17	14.6%	147,391
18-24	17.3%	429,534
25-34	20.3%	826,183
35-44	21.4%	832,776
45-54	19.7%	658,178
55-64	19.5%	604,298
65+	9.6%	455,592

The decline among adults 65 and over, and its gender pattern, is examined further under Participation Opportunities and Inclusion Priorities.

How Australians actually bushwalk

The figures in this section are drawn from AusPlay's aggregated report, covering data collected from July 2023 onwards, a different reporting period from the January-December 2025 annual tables used in the preceding section on scale, movement and demographics. This distinction is carried through into the methodology appendix and is not repeated at each subsection below.

Frequency and duration

Beyond how many Australians bushwalk, it is worth establishing how they typically do so. An estimated 11% of adult participants took part in bushwalking at least once a week, while the largest single group, 57%, participated between one and eleven times in the year. Session length skews long: 40% of sessions lasted three hours or more, and a further 32% lasted between two and three hours, meaning 72% of recorded sessions ran two hours or longer. Only 5% of sessions lasted under an hour.

Taken together, these figures portray bushwalking as generally periodic rather than frequent, while recorded sessions tend to be comparatively long. This differs from activities built around short, routine visits to a fixed venue.

Informal and organised participation

Bushwalking is overwhelmingly undertaken outside formal structures. Around 12.5% of adult bushwalking participation is classified as organised, meaning the large majority occurs informally.

The most common participation pathways are walking with friends or family and walking independently. AusPlay estimates that approximately 2.91 million adults participated informally with friends or family, while around 1.69 million participated informally by themselves. Smaller numbers participated through less formal groups, community organisations, recreation clubs, events, workplaces, educational institutions, sporting organisations and private or commercial businesses.

These pathways are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A person may walk alone on some occasions, with friends or family on others, and occasionally join an organised activity. The figures therefore describe the ways bushwalking takes place rather than separate, fixed populations of bushwalkers.

What is clear is that informal participation is the dominant mode. This has important implications for policy and investment. Most bushwalkers are not reached through club membership, commercial bookings or organised programs. Supporting them therefore depends on publicly available trails and information systems, including signage, maps, trail descriptions and safety guidance, as well as their own judgement.

Who people walk with

The prominence of friends-and-family participation shows that bushwalking is often a social activity even when it is not formally organised. Informal participation with friends or family is the largest single pathway recorded by AusPlay, exceeding the number of people who report walking independently.

This distinction matters. Informal does not necessarily mean solitary, unsupported or inexperienced. It includes family groups, partners, friendship groups and experienced walkers organising their own trips without an external provider.

At the same time, the substantial number of people walking alone reinforces the importance of information systems that do not depend on group leaders or organised briefings. Clear trail descriptions, realistic difficulty ratings, current conditions, navigation information and safety guidance are especially important when people are making their own decisions.

Public space is where bushwalking happens

Public space is overwhelmingly the dominant place of participation. AusPlay estimates that approximately 3.5 million adults participated in bushwalking in public spaces, far exceeding participation recorded at free community facilities, homes, workplaces, educational facilities, clubs or commercial premises.

This result needs to be interpreted carefully. "Public space" is a broad survey category and does not distinguish between national parks, state forests, conservation reserves, council-managed land, urban bushland or other publicly accessible landscapes. It also does not identify individual trails or parks.

Even with that limitation, the result is clear: bushwalking participation occurs primarily in shared landscapes rather than purpose-built sporting venues.

The trail network, surrounding landscape and public information systems are therefore not secondary amenities. They are the practical foundation that allows participation to occur.

A participation model built around access rather than membership

Taken together, the data describes an activity with a distinctive participation model:

- participation is usually informal
- many people walk with friends and family
- a substantial number walk independently
- sessions are often long but relatively infrequent
- public space is the principal recorded setting
- only a minority of participation occurs through organised pathways

This means bushwalking cannot be supported solely through the mechanisms commonly used for organised sport. Funding clubs, instructors and programs remains valuable, particularly for skills, inclusion and safety, but those channels reach only part of the bushwalking population.

Supporting the broader participation base also requires investment in:

- maintaining existing trails
- accurate and accessible visitor information
- consistent difficulty and risk communication
- environmental protection
- transport and access arrangements
- visitor management that works for independent users as well as organised groups

Bushwalking's informality is one of its strengths. It allows people to participate without membership fees, scheduled programs or specialised facilities. But informality does not mean the activity operates without support. It depends on the less visible systems that make safe and responsible independent participation possible.

Participation opportunities and inclusion priorities

The preceding sections have established what bushwalking includes, how large it is, and the recent increase recorded among Australian adults, and how people typically participate: predominantly informally, in public space, for extended but infrequent sessions. This section turns to a different question: across which groups is participation lower than the general population, and what does that suggest about where future participation growth could occur?

These findings are best read not as deficits, but as the clearest evidence base for where inclusion efforts and future participation growth could be targeted. Each is drawn from AusPlay

data, and the reporting period and population base are noted for each, since they are not consistent across all figures in this section.

Older adults

Adult participation, examined by age in the preceding section, sits close to 20% from the mid-twenties through to age 64, before falling to 9.6% among adults 65 and over (2025 annual data, adult 15+ base), roughly half the rate of every bracket between 25 and 64.

Supplementary detail from the aggregated July 2023 onwards report indicates this decline is more pronounced among women than men in this age group. Because this comes from a different reporting period than the 2025 age table above, it should be read as directional context rather than a precise current-year split.

This is one of the sharpest age-related differences in the dataset. It identifies older adults as an important focus for further research and for initiatives addressing accessibility, trail grading, confidence and the ability to continue walking safely in later life.

Household income

Participation rises consistently with household income (aggregated report, adult 15+ base), from 9.8% in households earning under \$40,000 per year to 23.6% in households earning \$200,000 or more. This is one of the clearest gradients in the dataset. AusPlay does not identify the specific barriers driving this pattern (cost, transport, time, awareness, or others), so this is presented as a finding rather than an explanation, but the scale of the gradient, participation is roughly two and a half times higher in the highest income band than the lowest, makes it a significant consideration for any strategy aimed at broadening access.

Disability

Adults with disability participate at 12.0%, compared with 18.6% for adults without disability (aggregated report, adult 18+ base), roughly two-thirds the rate. This is not a uniform gap: participation varies considerably by condition, from 18.7% among people with autism to 6.9% among amputees. The variation indicates that participation experiences and potential barriers differ substantially by condition, and that a single generic accessibility response is unlikely to meet every group's needs.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and people who speak a language other than English at home

Participation among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians is recorded at 11.5%, and among people who speak a language other than English at home at 16.4% (aggregated report, adult 18+ base), both below the national adult rate for the same base. As with income and disability, AusPlay's data identifies the gap without identifying its causes.

Children

AusPlay's organised-only measure of children's bushwalking participation (2025 annual data, child 0-14 base) fell from 76,194 to 53,776 participants year on year, a decline from 1.58% to 1.11%. This is drawn from a smaller sample base than the adult figures and reflects a single year-on-year comparison, so it should be treated as an early signal rather than a confirmed trend.

It is also important to restate the scope of this figure, established earlier in this report: AusPlay measures only organised bushwalking outside school hours for children, not informal family walks. It is reasonable to expect that many children also experience bushwalking informally with parents, carers and family groups, but AusPlay does not quantify that activity. This decline therefore describes only the organised segment and cannot be read as evidence that children's overall exposure to bushwalking is falling by a similar magnitude.

It nonetheless points to an opportunity to strengthen organised, out-of-school pathways into bushwalking for children and families. Adult data also shows that organised pathways account for only a minority of resident bushwalking participation, although the adult and child measures use different denominators and should not be compared directly.

Reading these findings together

The patterns in this section describe six separate groups, older adults, lower-income households, people with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people who speak a language other than English at home, and children, each participating at a lower rate than the general adult or child population, for reasons this dataset cannot fully explain on its own.

What they share is a common implication for planning: future participation strategies should not focus only on groups already participating at or above the national rate. The lower rates identified here justify closer investigation of possible barriers, including cost, transport, accessibility, information, cultural relevance, confidence and the availability of suitable organised pathways. AusPlay cannot determine which barriers matter most, so effective responses will require further research and engagement with the communities concerned.

State and regional snapshot

This section provides the geographic counterpart to the demographic analysis above: not who participates less, but where participation is concentrated, and where rates are highest relative to population. The figures below are drawn from AusPlay's aggregated report, covering data collected from July 2023 onwards, adult 15+ base, rather than the January-December 2025 annual tables used for national scale and movement earlier in this report.

Share of participants by state

By share of total national bushwalking participants, New South Wales accounts for the largest proportion (31.6%), followed by Victoria (23.3%) and Queensland (20.7%). Western Australia (11.4%), South Australia (6.2%), Tasmania (3.3%), the Australian Capital Territory (2.5%) and the Northern Territory (1.0%) each account for smaller shares. This distribution broadly reflects the concentration of Australia's population in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland, although a formal comparison with each jurisdiction's share of the national adult population would be needed to measure the relationship precisely.

Participation rate by state

Participation share and participation rate tell different stories. Tasmania has the highest recorded bushwalking participation rate of any state or territory, despite accounting for only

3.3% of the national participant total. The exact rate is not displayed in the published report view available for this analysis, so the finding is reported as a relative ranking rather than a precise percentage.

This pattern, a small state by population producing the highest participation rate, is consistent with a relationship between bushwalking participation and access to natural landscapes, but AusPlay does not identify the causes of the difference. Other factors, including climate, tourism patterns, demographics and survey variation across smaller state samples, could also contribute.

Metropolitan, regional and remote areas

Participation rates are higher outside major cities. Regional areas record an 18.8% participation rate and remote areas 21.6%, compared with 16.5% in major cities. These classifications describe the area in which participants reside, not necessarily the location in which their bushwalking took place.

As with the state-level pattern above, this is consistent with a relationship between participation and proximity to natural landscapes, but AusPlay does not test this or any other specific cause.

It is also worth noting that regional and remote areas have smaller underlying populations and, in the case of remote areas, a smaller AusPlay sample, so these rates carry a wider margin of error than the national or state-level figures.

Reading the geographic pattern together

Two things are true at once in this data. New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland account for the large majority of Australia's bushwalking participants in absolute terms, reflecting their larger resident populations. At the same time, participation rates are highest in Tasmania and are higher among residents of regional and remote areas than among residents of major cities.

Both patterns matter for planning, but they answer different questions. Participant numbers indicate where the largest populations of bushwalkers live and where demand for information, access and participation support may be greatest. Participation rates indicate where bushwalking is most prevalent relative to the resident population. Neither measure identifies where individual walks take place or which trails experience the greatest visitation pressure; that requires park, trail and visitor-monitoring data.

Economic and wellbeing value

Bushwalking generates value beyond the participation numbers already presented, but this value needs to be described precisely, distinguishing what AusPlay measures directly from what it can only gesture towards. This section covers two dimensions: the economic activity generated by resident participation, and the motivations that draw Australians to the activity. Figures in both parts are drawn from AusPlay's aggregated report covering data collected from July 2023 onwards, adult 15+ base unless otherwise noted.

Economic value

AusPlay estimates that Australian adults spent approximately **\$291 million annually on paid bushwalking participation**. This is not a measure of the total bushwalking industry, the walking tourism economy or all personal expenditure associated with the activity. It represents self-reported spending by Australian residents on the participation-cost categories captured by AusPlay, including registration, membership and venue or access fees. Equipment, clothing, transport, accommodation and other tourism-related spending are not included.

Approximately **14.9% of adult participants, 568,700 people, reported paid participation** during the year. The remaining majority reported no expenditure within the categories captured by this measure. This is consistent with bushwalking's predominantly informal participation model, but it should not be interpreted as meaning those participants incurred no costs at all.

Among those who did report expenditure, the **median annual spend was \$60**, while the **average (mean) annual spend was \$512**. The substantial difference between the median and mean indicates that expenditure is unevenly distributed among those reporting paid participation. Most paying participants reported relatively modest annual costs, while a smaller number of higher-cost activities appear to lift the average. The published tables do not provide the full expenditure distribution, so the precise shape and causes of this difference cannot be established.

The equivalent children's figures show 15,600 children, 22.9% of those captured by AusPlay's organised-only participation measure, engaging in paid participation. Median annual expenditure was \$60 and mean expenditure was \$1,227. The wide difference may reflect a small number of relatively expensive organised programs, although the smaller child sample means these estimates should be treated cautiously.

Resident bushwalking generates measurable paid-participation expenditure, while formal participation fees remain low or absent for most participants. This should not be interpreted as showing that bushwalking carries no broader personal cost, since equipment, transport, food, accommodation and tourism expenditure sit outside the measure. This is also distinct from the broader walking tourism economy described earlier in this report (guided multi-day treks, accommodation-linked packages, international and interstate visitor spending), which AusPlay is not designed to size and which would require Tourism Research Australia or state tourism data to measure properly.

Motivations and potential wellbeing value

AusPlay asks respondents about their reasons for participating, and this offers insight into what draws Australians to bushwalking. It is important to be precise about what this represents: AusPlay records self-reported motivations, not measured health, psychological or social outcomes. The dataset can tell us why people say they bushwalk, or why they might take it up; it cannot, on its own, quantify the physical health, mental health or social benefits that may result.

Among adults considering taking up bushwalking, the most commonly reported reasons were being outdoors or enjoying nature (59%), fun and enjoyment (48%), and physical health or fitness (40%). A separate view of existing participants' stated motivations, presented in the source report as a relative-frequency word cloud rather than exact percentages, shows the same broad themes, being outdoors and connecting with nature, fun and enjoyment, and

physical health or fitness, as the most prominent, alongside smaller mentions of psychological wellbeing and social connection. Because this second measure is not reported as precise figures, it is presented here as directional confirmation rather than a quantified finding.

These motivations suggest that nature, enjoyment and health are important components of bushwalking's appeal. AusPlay does not, however, directly measure whether participation produces corresponding physical, psychological or social outcomes. Establishing that would require drawing on public health and wellbeing research specifically designed to measure those effects, rather than a participation survey designed to measure who takes part in what activity and why.

What this section establishes, and what it does not

AusPlay tells us why people say they participate and how much they spend on formal participation costs. It does not measure the full economic value of walking tourism, nor does it directly quantify the health and wellbeing outcomes produced by participation.

What the data does establish is that bushwalking generates measurable but unevenly distributed paid-participation expenditure, while formal participation costs remain absent for most participants. It also shows that being outdoors and enjoying nature is one of the activity's strongest stated attractions. Together, these findings reinforce the importance of the landscape itself as the foundation on which both participation and its wider value depend.

Safety, risk and the case for judgement-based investment

The argument, not the alarm

This section does not argue that bushwalking is unusually dangerous. The evidence does not support that claim, and making it would run against the report's central finding that bushwalking is one of Australia's most accessible, low-barrier outdoor activities. The argument instead is narrower and more practical: **the scale and informality of participation mean safety investment cannot rely primarily on organised training, equipment campaigns or emergency response. It must also improve the quality of the decisions independent walkers are able to make before and during a trip.**

Safety at the scale of participation

The preceding sections establish the relevant context. Bushwalking is undertaken by almost 4 million adult Australians annually. Most participation is informal: an estimated 1.69 million adults report walking independently, and a further 2.91 million report walking informally with friends or family. Sessions are often long, with a majority running two hours or more. Public space is the dominant recorded setting.

At this scale, safety cannot be treated as a concern only for clubs, guides or highly experienced walkers. The large majority of bushwalkers are making their own decisions about route, timing, conditions and turnaround, without a leader, guide or formal briefing involved.

What the AusPlay injury data tells us

AusPlay's aggregated report records that an estimated **148,700 adults aged 18 and over experienced an injury associated with bushwalking annually**, equivalent to 4.0% of adult

participants on that population base. Soft-tissue injuries (sprains, strains and tears) are the most common type, and injuries to the hip, knee and leg are the most common body-part category, followed by ankle and foot injuries.

This data carries an important limitation, stated directly in the source report: the questions on injury type and body part are not activity-specific, and ask about the respondent's most recent injury, which may have come from an activity other than bushwalking if the respondent was injured in more than one. The detailed injury categories should therefore be read as indicative context rather than a precise bushwalking-specific injury profile.

AusPlay indicates that injury affects a minority of participants, but at national participation scale that minority represents a substantial number of people. This is offered as scale context, not as evidence of an elevated risk relative to other outdoor or physical activities, which this report has not compared.

Why organised safety pathways have limited reach

Clubs, guides and training programs are a genuine and valuable part of the organised services economy described earlier in this report. Bushwalking clubs in particular have decades of accumulated trip-leading experience, and commercial operators and educational programs provide structured opportunities for skills development and supervised exposure to risk.

But organised participation accounts for only around 12.5% of resident bushwalking activity. Safety systems built mainly around club induction, leader qualifications, commercial briefings or formal courses will, by definition, reach only a minority of bushwalking activity. This is not a claim that organised groups are inherently safer than independent walkers, a comparison this data cannot support. It is a straightforward observation that structured safety education has limited reach, because most bushwalking participation occurs outside them.

Incidents develop through interacting pressures

Trail Hiking Australia developed the Hiking Safety Systems Framework (HSSF) as a practical way of understanding how hiking incidents can emerge through interacting pressures rather than a single isolated failure: navigation, weather exposure, hydration and energy, injury, equipment, communication and rescue capability, load and mobility, and decision-making.

In practical terms, this means small problems tend to begin quietly rather than dramatically. Fatigue can alter judgement before the person experiencing it recognises the extent of the change. Navigation uncertainty consumes time, and that lost time creates pressure to continue rather than turn back. Deteriorating weather narrows the options available at exactly the moment good judgement matters most. Walking solo removes the natural check that a second person's perspective provides, and even within a group, dynamics can discourage someone from voicing a concern the group would benefit from hearing. A personal locator beacon is a genuine safety net, but it is primarily a response mechanism once a situation has already become serious. It cannot substitute for the decisions that may prevent that point being reached.

Drawing on search and rescue experience and the development of HSSF, Trail Hiking Australia approaches safety as a system of interacting pressures rather than a checklist of equipment.

Judgement-based investment

Outdoor safety responses commonly include rescue capability, warning signage, emergency communications, equipment messaging and physical trail works. All of these matter, but many operate late in the incident chain or address only one part of it.

Judgement-based investment acts earlier and is particularly important for the large majority of bushwalking activity that occurs outside organised pathways. It could include:

- consistent trail difficulty and exposure information across parks and land managers
- realistic time estimates, rather than optimistic ones
- clearer turnaround guidance built into trip planning information
- timely condition reporting that is clearly dated and regularly updated
- navigation information that communicates uncertainty, not just a route line
- public education about how risk compounds over the course of a trip, rather than treating it as a single fixed quantity
- decision prompts at trailheads or digital planning points, at the moment a plan is being formed
- communication that helps people recognise when the plan no longer matches conditions, before that gap becomes dangerous

The aim is not to remove risk from bushwalking. It is to help people recognise changing risk early enough to retain meaningful choices.

Infrastructure has a role, but it is not the whole answer

Some risks are best addressed through physical works: track maintenance, bridges, barriers, signage or emergency communications infrastructure. Others are created or amplified by poor information, unrealistic expectations, late decisions and diminishing margins as a trip progresses. Infrastructure can reduce particular hazards. It cannot replace judgement.

Policy implications

- Fund prevention as well as response, not response alone.
- Design safety information for independent walkers as the primary audience, not only for organised groups.
- Standardise how difficulty, exposure and current conditions are communicated across parks and land managers.
- Improve the systematic collection and use of incident and near-miss data to refine information, education and infrastructure over time.
- Preserve the challenge and autonomy that draw people to bushwalking, while improving the quality of the decisions available to them.
- Recognise that rescue capacity is the final layer of a safety system, not the primary strategy.

Policy and land management implications

Bringing the evidence together

This report has established a consistent picture across participation, behaviour, inclusion, geography, economic value and safety. Bushwalking is large, with recent data showing an increase in adult participation, and predominantly informal, with the large majority of participation occurring outside clubs, guides or formal programs. Public space is the principal recorded setting for that participation. Access to landscape, rather than membership of an organisation, is the foundation that makes participation possible at scale. Organised pathways, whether clubs, commercial operators or community programs, are valuable but reach only a minority of overall activity. Inclusion gaps exist across several distinct groups, and the evidence suggests that no single intervention is likely to address them all. Resident participation, organised services and the walking visitor economy all draw on the same shared landscape asset. And because most walkers make their own decisions without organised oversight, safety investment needs to support the quality of those decisions, not only respond once something has gone wrong.

Read together, these findings point toward a small number of governing principles for policy and land management, rather than a long and undifferentiated list of actions.

Guiding principles

1. Treat the landscape as core recreation infrastructure

Parks, reserves, forests and trails are not simply the setting in which bushwalking happens. They are the underlying asset that supports resident participation, organised services and walking tourism alike, as set out in this report's three-economies framework. Planning and funding decisions should treat their condition, accessibility and resilience with the same seriousness typically given to built recreation infrastructure.

2. Maintain before expanding

A well-maintained existing network should be treated as the first priority before new infrastructure is pursued, particularly where maintenance backlogs are already affecting access, safety or environmental condition. Given that participation depends fundamentally on landscape quality and access, existing network condition warrants at least the same scrutiny as proposals for new trails or major visitor infrastructure.

3. Plan for independent walkers

Design information, trail grading, signage, access arrangements and safety communication for the majority of participants who walk outside clubs, guides and formal programs. Information and safety systems delivered primarily through organised participation will have limited reach across the broader bushwalking population.

4. Match investment to evidence

Use participation data (such as AusPlay) for understanding who walks and how. Use visitor and trail-monitoring data for understanding where walking actually takes place and which locations experience the greatest pressure. Use tourism data for understanding commercial value and

visitor economy scale. Use ecological data for understanding what a given landscape can sustain. This report has been explicit throughout about which of these questions AusPlay can and cannot answer; land managers and agencies should be equally explicit about which dataset is informing which decision, rather than using one dataset as a substitute for another it was not designed to measure.

5. Support inclusion without standardising every experience

Improve access for older adults, people with disability, lower-income households, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, people who speak a language other than English at home, and families with children, recognising that each of these groups likely faces a different combination of barriers, as this report's inclusion findings show. This is likely to require different trail types, information formats, transport arrangements, programs and support for different groups, rather than an assumption that every trail can or should be made suitable for every person.

6. Support responsible tourism without confusing tourism growth with recreation need

Acknowledge the genuine value of guided experiences and the walking visitor economy, while assessing commercial proposals against conservation objectives, carrying capacity, public benefit and whether the proposed development needs to occur inside a protected area at all. Growth in visitor numbers or commercial activity should not be treated as evidence of recreation need in its own right, nor should recreation participation data be used to justify commercial development it was never designed to evaluate.

7. Invest in judgement as well as rescue

Carry forward the argument set out in the preceding section: improve difficulty information, current conditions reporting, turnaround guidance, risk communication and incident learning, while retaining rescue capacity as the final layer of a safety system rather than its primary strategy.

8. Protect the qualities people come for

Growth should not be pursued in ways that diminish the environmental quality, sense of place and public access that make bushwalking valuable in the first place. This is the report's central principle, and the one from which every other recommendation follows.

Recommendations by audience

Audience	Priority actions
Governments and parks agencies	Fund trail maintenance and condition monitoring at a level consistent with bushwalking's scale. Commission or support trail-level and visitor-monitoring data to complement AusPlay's participation data. Standardise trail difficulty, exposure and conditions communication across jurisdictions. Direct inclusion investment toward the specific groups and potential barriers identified in this report, informed by further research into their causes.

Land managers and Traditional Owners	Prioritise the health and resilience of existing trail networks and surrounding landscapes ahead of new construction. Involve Traditional Owners as decision-makers in matters affecting Country used for bushwalking, recognising their enduring cultural authority, knowledge and responsibilities regardless of the contemporary land-tenure or management arrangement. Improve the systematic collection and analysis of incident data, and explore practical mechanisms for capturing relevant near-miss learning where this can be done consistently and responsibly.
Tourism and regional bodies	Recognise that AusPlay participation data does not measure the walking visitor economy, and invest in the tourism-specific data needed to understand and support that economy properly. Support commercial and guided walking operators as part of the organised services economy, without treating their growth as evidence of, or a substitute for, understanding resident recreation need. Ground regional walking tourism strategies in the same landscape-protection principles that underpin resident participation.
Clubs, operators and outdoor organisations	Continue providing structured safety education, skills development and group leadership, recognising this reaches only a minority of overall participation. Share de-identified incident experience and operational lessons with broader safety and land-management initiatives, where appropriate. Support extension of safety information and judgement-based resources to independent walkers, rather than treating organised members as the only relevant audience.

From principle to place

These recommendations are not a universal prescription for every trail or landscape. Appropriate responses will differ according to ecological sensitivity, cultural values, land tenure, visitor volume, remoteness and the nature of the walking experience. The consistent requirement is that decisions begin with the landscape's capacity and values, use evidence suited to the question being asked, and preserve meaningful public access without assuming that growth must always take the form of additional development.

Methodology and data sources

1. Primary data sources

This report draws on two AusPlay data products, released by the Australian Sports Commission.

AusPlay annual participation tables, January-December 2025 (source: C4S AusPlay By Sport Data Tables, released 30 April 2026)

- National adult and child participation rates and estimated participant numbers
- 2024-2025 year-on-year comparison
- Adult gender and age breakdowns

AusPlay aggregated Bush Walking report, July 2023 onwards (source: AusPlay Bush Walking Power BI report)

- Participation frequency and duration
- Organisation pathways and ways of participation
- Places of participation
- Income, disability, Indigenous and LOTE participation
- State, regional and remote patterns
- Expenditure
- Injury
- Sub-activity breakdown (bush walking, hiking, virtual bush walking)

These two products cover different reporting periods and are not directly interchangeable. Figures are attributed to their source product throughout this report and again in this appendix.

2. Population bases

Measure	Population base
Adult headline participation, movement, age and gender	Adults aged 15+
Children's participation	Children aged 0-14; organised activity outside school hours only
Income	Adults aged 18+
Disability	Adults aged 18+
Indigenous and LOTE	Adults aged 18+
Injury	Adults aged 18+
State and remoteness	Adults aged 15+
Frequency, duration, organisation pathway, places of participation, expenditure	Adults aged 15+ (children's expenditure: children aged 0-14, organised participants only)

3. Reporting-period differences

This report combines single-year annual estimates for January-December 2025 (used for national scale, year-on-year movement, and adult age and gender breakdowns) with aggregated estimates collected from July 2023 onwards (used for participation intensity, organisation pathways, places of participation, income, disability, Indigenous and LOTE participation, state and regional patterns, expenditure, injury, and the sub-activity breakdown).

These are not directly interchangeable. The aggregated figures describe broader participation patterns smoothed across a longer window, rather than a 2025 point estimate, and are used in

this report specifically where the January-December 2025 tables did not provide equivalent detail.

4. What "bushwalking" includes

The umbrella category used throughout this report includes three AusPlay sub-activities: bush walking, hiking, and virtual bush walking. Sub-activity participation estimates overlap (the reported percentages exceed 100% when combined) and should not be added together or treated as mutually exclusive participant populations.

The available AusPlay documentation for this report does not provide a precise definition of virtual bush walking. This is noted here as a data limitation rather than a resolved definition.

5. Adult and child comparability

Adult participation figures include both informal and organised activity. Child participation figures include organised activity outside school hours only. The child estimate is therefore not a measure of all children who bushwalk. Informal family and independently arranged activity sits outside the measure, meaning the organised-only estimate should not be interpreted as the total scale of children's bushwalking participation. Adult and child participation rates should not be compared to one another as though they represented equivalent scopes of activity.

6. Organisation measures and denominators

Two figures relating to organised participation appear at different points in this report and use different denominators:

- **2.2%** of the total adult population participates in bushwalking through an organised pathway (base: all adults 15+).
- **12.5%** of adult bushwalking participation is classified as organised (base: adult bushwalking participation).

These should not be substituted for one another. Organisation pathways may also overlap: a person may walk independently on some occasions and through an organised pathway on others, so these figures describe the ways bushwalking takes place rather than fixed, mutually exclusive populations of bushwalkers.

7. Participation versus visitation

AusPlay measures resident participation. It does not identify which trail or park was used, where an individual walk occurred, visitor numbers at a specific site, interstate or international visitor demand as a tourism category, or guided-tour volumes or operator performance.

State, metropolitan, regional and remote classifications used in this report describe participant residence, not the location in which bushwalking took place.

8. Expenditure scope

The \$291 million adult expenditure estimate cited in this report covers the paid-participation cost categories captured by AusPlay: registration, membership and venue or access fees. It excludes equipment, clothing, transport, food, accommodation and broader tourism spending.

Mean and median expenditure differ substantially (\$512 and \$60 respectively for adults). The published tables do not provide the full expenditure distribution, so the precise shape and

causes of this difference are interpreted, not confirmed, in this report. The equivalent children's figures (mean \$1,227, median \$60) rest on a smaller sample and should be treated cautiously.

9. Injury limitations

The injury questions in the AusPlay aggregated report are not activity-specific. They ask about the respondent's most recent injury, which may have come from an activity other than bushwalking if the respondent was injured in more than one activity during the reporting period. The headline estimate (148,700 adults aged 18+, 4.0% of adult participants on that base) is associated with bushwalking participation; the detailed injury type and body-part categories should be read as indicative context rather than a precise bushwalking-specific injury profile.

10. Inclusion and causation

AusPlay identifies differences in participation rates across groups (older adults, lower-income households, people with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people who speak a language other than English at home, and children) but does not explain their causes. This report does not claim that observed gaps are caused by any single factor, including cost, accessibility, transport, cultural relevance, information, confidence or program availability. Establishing which barriers matter most for each group would require further research and engagement with the communities concerned.

11. Tourism and wellbeing evidence

AusPlay does not size the walking visitor economy. Understanding that economy properly requires Tourism Research Australia's National and International Visitor Surveys, state and territory tourism data, park-level visitation figures, and operator-reported data.

AusPlay records self-reported motivations for participation, not measured physical, mental-health or social outcomes. Any claim about the broader wellbeing effects of bushwalking participation would require external public health and wellbeing research designed specifically to measure those effects.

12. Interpretive principles used in this report

Throughout, this report:

- distinguishes single-year estimates from confirmed multi-year trends
 - avoids treating correlation (for example, between remoteness and participation rate) as evidence of causation
 - does not use participation data as a proxy for visitation, trail usage or tourism demand
 - does not treat the resident participation, organised services and walking visitor economies as mutually exclusive populations
 - identifies clearly where an interpretation is reasonable but unconfirmed by the available data, rather than presenting it as an established finding
-