Obesity.qxd 27/2/06 4:15 pm Page 2



The bare bones of obesity

A report released in California last April stated that in 2000 the cost of obesity born by Californian businesses was nearly $22 billion. This was made up of medical bills, employees' compensation and lost productivity. So when Britain's Prince Charles noted in a speech just this January that he thought it was an issue that people were getting a little fatter, no one actually laughed at him. Indeed, while California stands out, a report recently published in the United States by Obesity Research showed that in 2003 direct medical costs of obesity came to $350 per American adult, or over 5% of the national health costs. Of particular note, according to author Finkelstein, was that for the age group 18–36 the continuing growth of obesity is creating a 36% rise in medical expenses.

Obesity hits our pocket books in many costly ways, but most of all it blights and curtails lives, creating misery where there should be happiness, and damaging the total well being of society. It is as though we are fighting for the very antithesis of the golden rule of Bhutan: that gross national happiness must come before gross national product.

There are two aspects to this. First we exercise less, and second our eating is not as healthy. The consequences are that we add that extra kilo each year and are more likely to contract diabetes and other similar diseases. Obesity increases the incidence of chronic diseases such as Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and arthritis along with higher risks of a number of cancers including endometrial, post-menopausal breast, colon and kidney. *WSA* is not a food magazine, although diet is important to most of our readers, so the recipe for recovery closest to the hearts of readers is how to get more people exercising.

The sports industry has certainly got the message. The Outdoor Industry Association (OIA), the US national trade association for the Outdoor Industry, released its State of the Industry Report at the start of the recent Outdoor Retailer Winter Market in Salt Lake City, Utah.

OIA initiatives

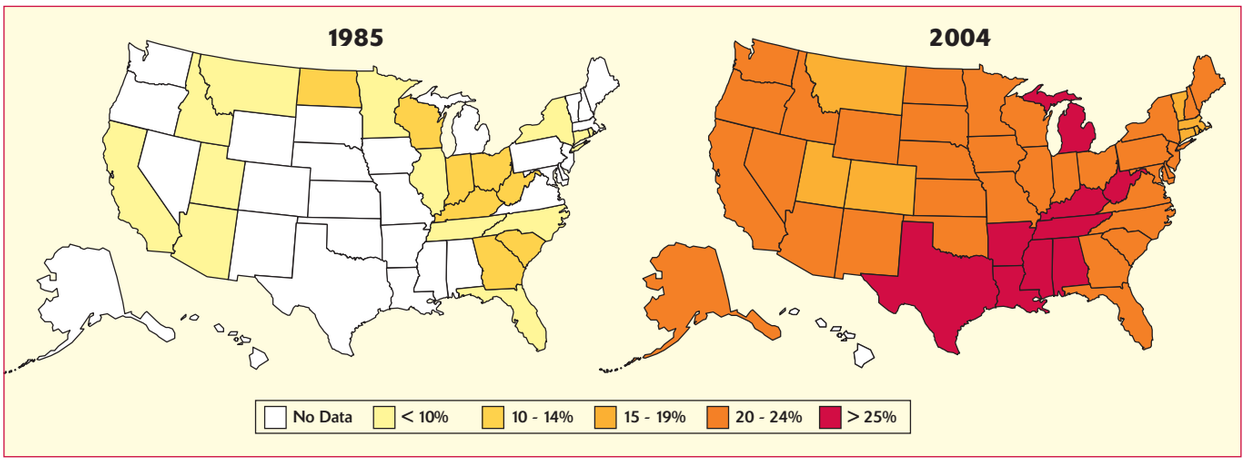
"Outdoor recreation occupies an enviable position at a unique time in our nation's history," says Frank Hugelmeyer, president of OIA. "It offers a solution to the pressing problems of obesity and inactivity, Americans are increasingly drawn to the active outdoor lifestyle, and the Industry is beginning to receive recognition as a major contributor to America's economic vitality. More than ever, it is our potential that defines us."

The outdoor lifestyle is gaining in popularity and Americans are looking to accessible recreation as a solution to the inactivity crisis. The industry continues to attract the attention of investors, and the outdoor business community has matured into a vibrant $33 billion industry.

Who is playing? Two of the largest segments of the population are 'Baby Boomers' (born 1946-64) and 'Millennials' (born 1978-2003). Boomers will remain a strong foundation for the industry, but the Millennials will change the way we do business, the places we play, and how we define ourselves:

- Boomers are participating in a broader mix of activities, blending adventure with comfort.
- Millennials embrace adrenalin sports like moto-cross and wakeboarding as well as more traditional outdoor human-powered activities like climbing and snowboarding.
- Millennials respond to activities they see in the media and those that are easily accessible.
- Compared with Boomers, Millennials see activity in terms of 'big air,' competition and achievement (not nature and wellness).

Obesity.qxd 27/2/06 4:15 pm Page 3



Obesity trends (30 lbs overweight for 5' 4" person) among US adults.
Source: Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, CDC.

- Millennials, like Boomers, integrate activity into a broader lifestyle and prize social connections more than the activities themselves.

Where are we playing? Traditionally, outdoor recreation has been synonymous with the backcountry. But as Americans battle the inactivity crisis, and outdoor enthusiasts increasingly seek activities that can be done before dinner, close to home recreation opportunities are more important than ever:

- Outdoor industry and policy makers must expand focus to include 'front-country' (backyard or local park) and urban recreation areas.
- By embracing these new playgrounds and ensuring that all Americans have places to play close to home, we are creating a healthier nation.
- OIA hopes to bring quality parks and trails within 15 minutes of every child in the US.

Where are we headed? This industry is and will always be a product of people's passion. Like many of its greatest innovations, however, its growth and success require that we continue to build on our strong foundation, while adjusting to the new realities brought by Millennials. Whether our participants are young or old, mountain bikers, bird watchers or day hikers, they share common goals that draw them to the active outdoor lifestyle:

- A connection to the playgrounds where they participate in recreation.
- The value of good health/wellness and the simple joy of being in nature.

Youngsters are slipping away, all 73 million of them

The OIA spent a lot of time considering the position of children and its studies show that physical activity levels out as children age and then declines in the teen years. It looked at data for 14–18-year-old American children (9-12th grade) and during these years regular involvement in what is described as 'vigorous physical activity' dropped from nearly 70% to just over 50%, while at the same time those who went to daily PE classes more than halved from 38% to 18%. Even amongst those that did attend PE classes, many did not participate for more than 20 minutes. Most frightening of all was that 42% did not take part in any school or community sports team. This is then added to by the fact that walking and cycling have seen dramatic declines in the under fifteens, and that fewer and fewer students walk to school.

In its 'getting>youth>active' programme the OIA notes that family and group activity is what attracts and holds youngsters. Peer pressure is important and as such the programme focuses on ideas, programmes, partnerships, and resources that utilise the mentor chain to grow participation in outdoor activities among 5–18 year-olds.

"The challenge of encouraging active outdoor lifestyles for all Americans is high stakes and has serious consequences," notes Hugelmeyer. "It's time for the outdoor industry to make introducing youth to the active lifestyle a business as well as a personal mission. Collectively, the industry can reverse the inactivity trend among American youth and help them become outdoor enthusiasts who are active for life.

"There are 73 million Americans under the age of 18, who in the last year spent an average of more than four hours a day in front of a screen. Obesity rates are climbing and 20% of youths are clinically obese, creating a potentially large public health burden on society."

As part of the programme launched last year, the Outdoor Industry Foundation (OIF) will be rolling out a number of programmes and partnerships that leverage the combined strength of the industry to support and increase opportunities for America's youth to get outside and get active. One such programme is Get Fit With US, a partnership between the OIF, the US Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management to get more youths playing on America's public lands and waterways.

Equipment cost is a big issue at entry level

As one looks at the next key area of the 16–24-year-olds peer pressure remains important but the research notes that cost of equipment and pressure of time have a great impact. In the USA, entry sports, for those who get involved in the outdoors, have tended to be hiking, bicycling and camping. Crossover is also relevant as over 70% of climbers and skiers also cycle, and over 60% of those involved in paddle sports also camp or backpack.

The 16–24-year-old group takes part in exercise because it wishes to do something physically challenging, and once into sport these people are less likely to give it up than older groups. This is the group that is also a prime target for indoor sports as well, highlighted by the great success over the last few years of five-a-side indoor football leagues in many parts of the world.

The OIF is to be applauded for its efforts in this area. There is no doubt that the world needs to do all it can to reverse the trend away from daily exercise. Clearly along with good programmes, good affordable clothing and equipment is needed, especially for the young.