

MANAGING DOGS IN THE YORK REGIONAL FOREST

WHAT YOU SAID IN 2020

FORESTRY
1-877-464-9675
york.ca/forestry




York Region



This report summarizes thoughts and opinions gathered through The Regional Municipality of York's Managing Dogs in the York Regional Forest survey.

The survey was available from October 26 to November 8, 2020 on york.ca/dogsurvey and promoted through social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), e-newsletters, road signs, newspapers, posters at the York Regional Forest and on the Region's internal staff website.

This report outlines what we asked and how you responded.

Learn key themes and how the Region plans to use the information gathered to better manage dogs in the forest.

SURVEY BACKGROUND

The purpose of the survey was to explore opinions related to dogs in the York Regional Forest.

This is one part of a comprehensive review underway to determine the future of dog walking opportunities in the Forest.

The survey provided an opportunity for the community to be heard, share their concerns and offer feedback.

Notes

Rounding to the nearest whole number

The results for some of the survey questions were rounded to the nearest whole number, (e.g., 33.33% is rounded to 33%). As a result, the percentage total for questions (where the values were rounded) will not add up to 100 percent.

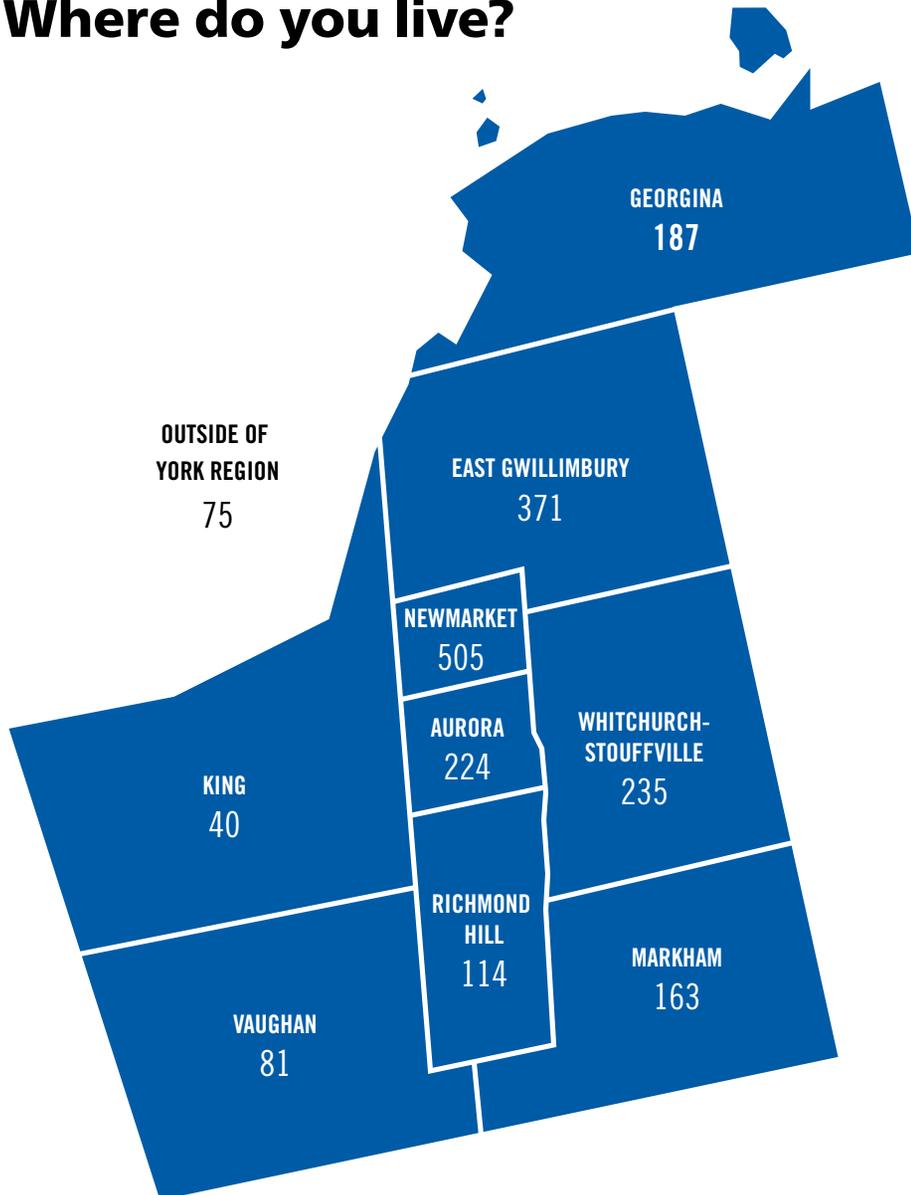
Response Percentages Exceed 100%

When questions allow survey respondents to select more than no response or answer, the total number of responses for that question will be greater than the number of survey respondents that answered the question. This will cause the total response percentages to exceed 100 percent.

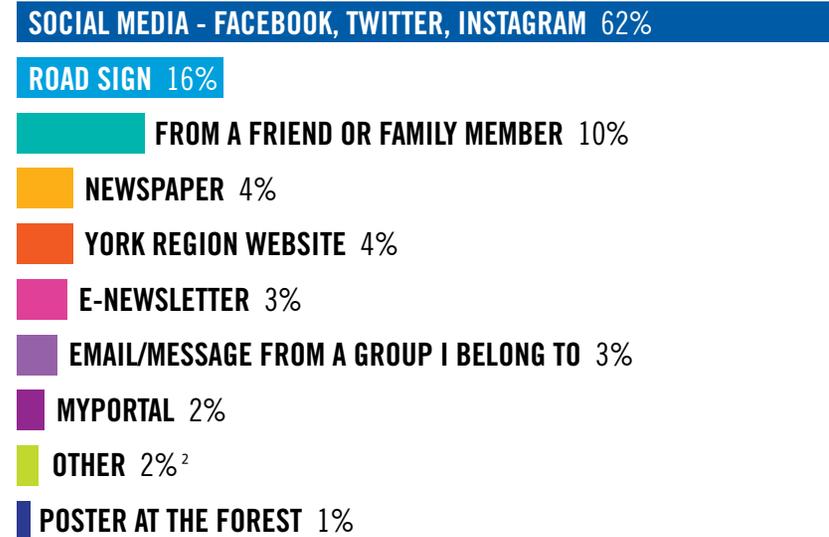
WHO WE HEARD FROM

The Managing Dogs in the York Regional Forest survey had a total of 1,995 completed responses.¹

Where do you live?



How did you hear about the survey?

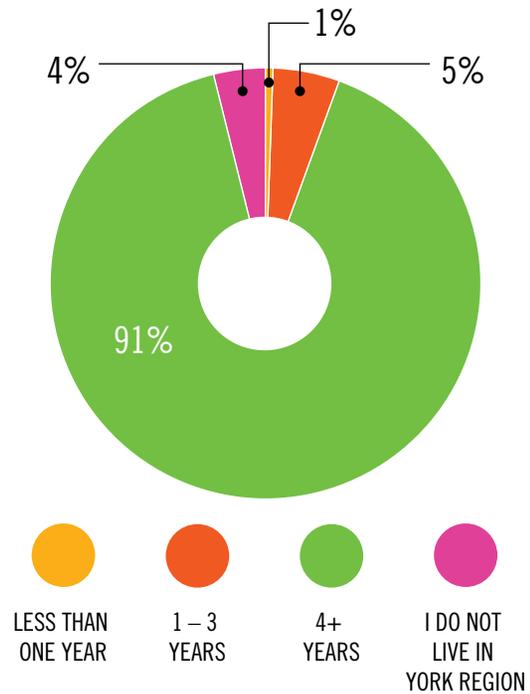


Notes

¹ (1) The figures in this report only include responses from survey respondents. ² (2) In addition, 84 Facebook comments, 1 Twitter comment, and 3 comments to Access York were received. These open-ended comments have been analyzed and are included in the "Experiences" and "Recommendations" charts and commentary on pages 17 to 21.

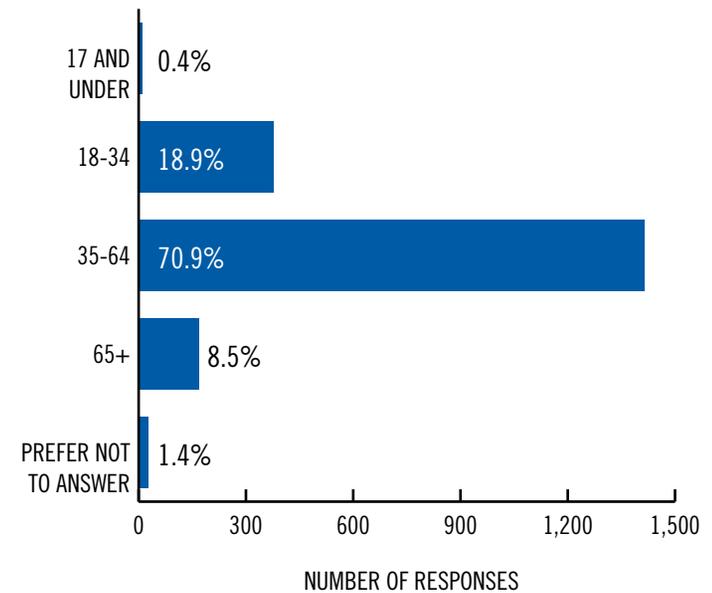
How long have you lived in York Region?

91% of respondents have lived in York Region for more than 4 years.



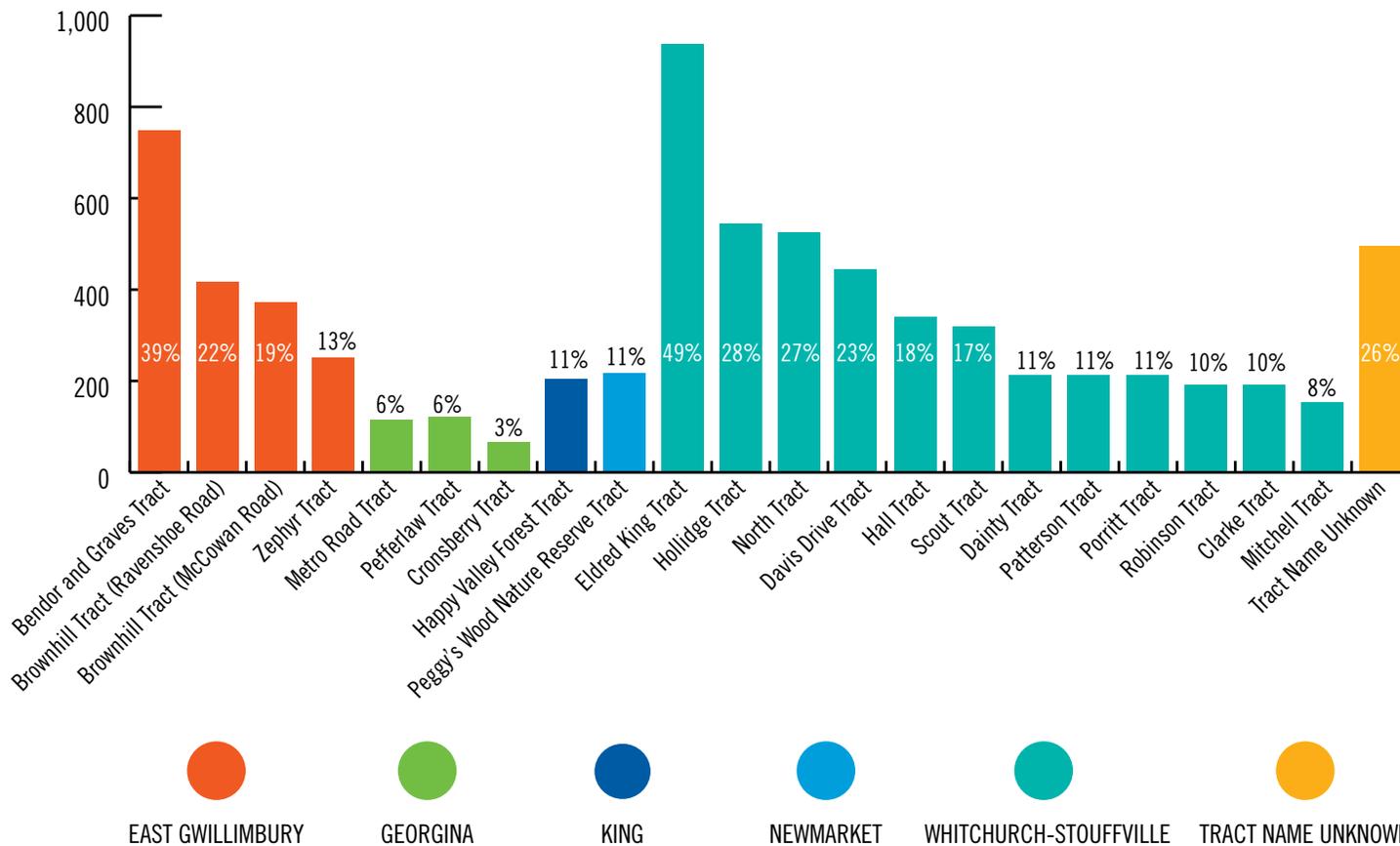
How old are you?

An analysis of the age profile of survey respondents shows 71% are between 35 to 64 years.



Where do you visit?

Overall, 1,926 (97%) respondents reported visiting the York Regional Forest. When asked about locations visited, Eldred King Tract (49%), Bendor and Graves Tract (39%), Hollidge Tract (28%) and North Tract (27%) were the most visited tracts in the York Regional Forest. A quarter (25%) of respondents could not remember the name of the tract visited. 1,318 (68%) respondents reported visiting more than one forest tract.



A wide range of forest tracts in York Region are popular among users.

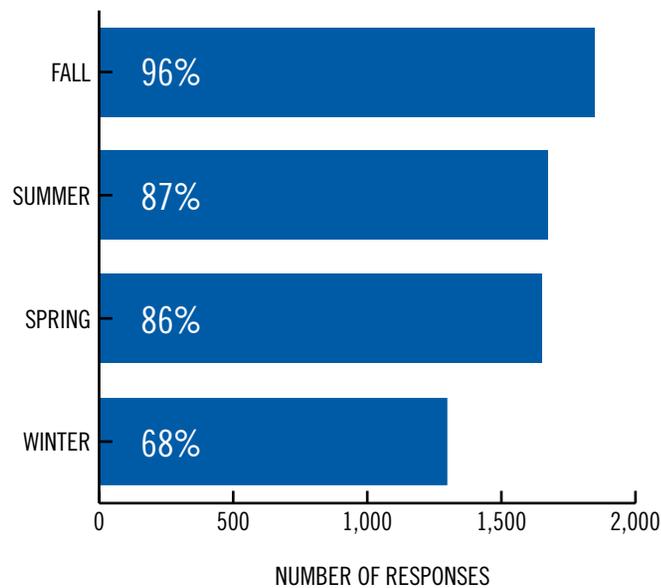
When do you visit?

People (and their dogs) visit the York Regional Forest year-round. Generally, the majority of survey respondents who indicated using the Forest reported visiting in the fall, spring and summer with slightly fewer reporting visits in the winter. The majority of respondents noted they visit the Forest between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m.

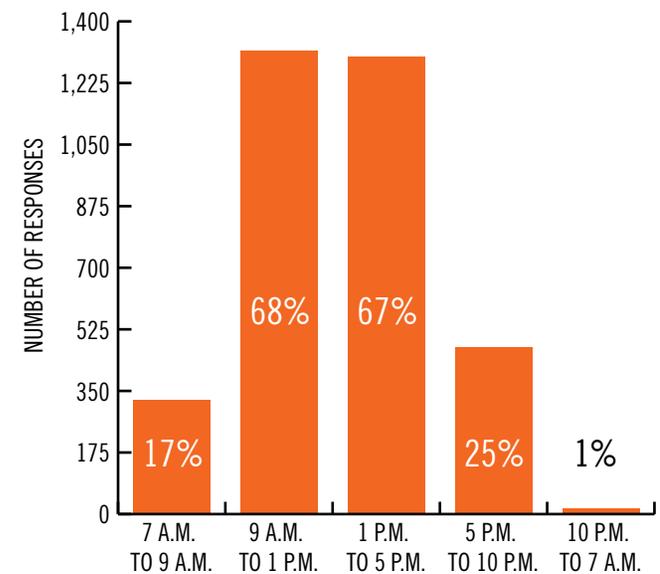


The Forest is used throughout the year at different times of day, on weekdays and weekends, and by a number of frequent users.

TIME OF YEAR



TIME OF DAY



How often do you visit?

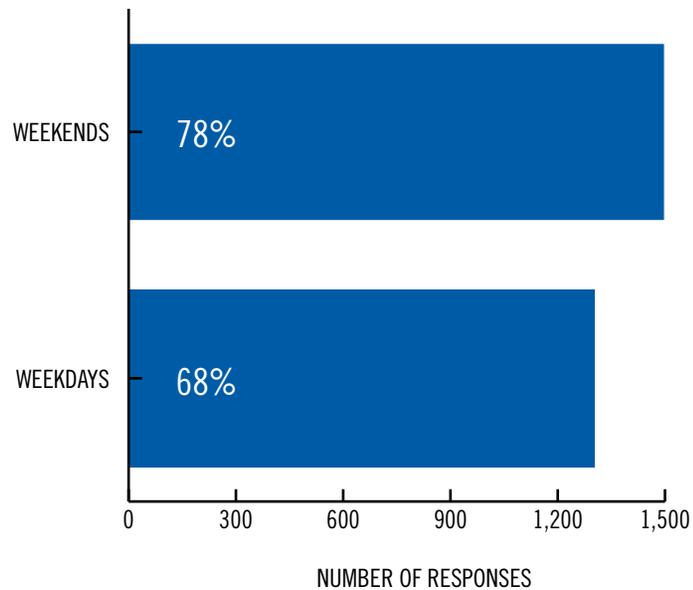
78% of visitors to the York Regional Forest visit on weekends; 68% visit on weekdays and 45% selected both weekends and weekdays.

37% visited the Forest 'a few times a month', whereas 29% visited 'several times a week'.

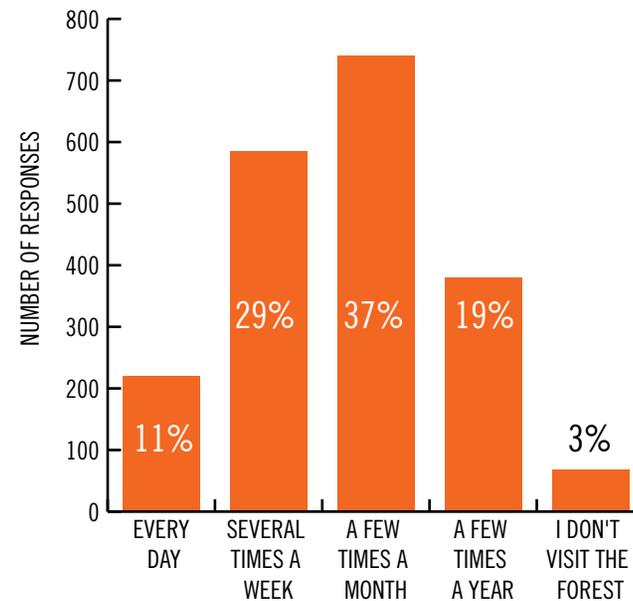
11% reported visiting every day.



WEEKDAY OR WEEKEND



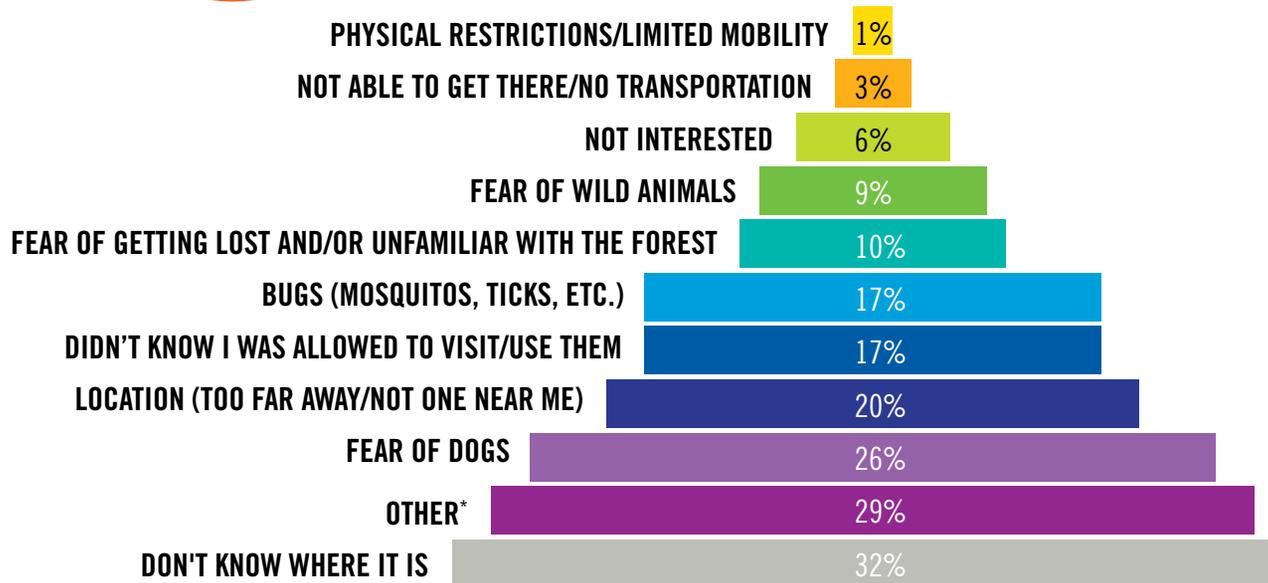
FREQUENCY OF VISITS



Why don't you visit?

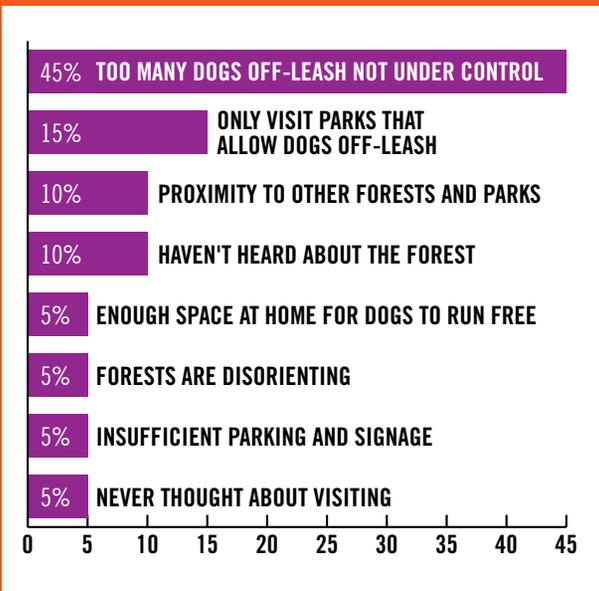
Of the survey respondents 4% (69 people) reported not visiting the York Regional Forest. Of those people, 32% stated they did not know where the Forest tracts are; 26% of respondents indicated that their fear of dogs prevented them from visiting the Forest.²

69
RESPONSES



² Note: Percentages don't add to 100% because respondents were allowed to choose more than one answer.

* OTHER REASONS



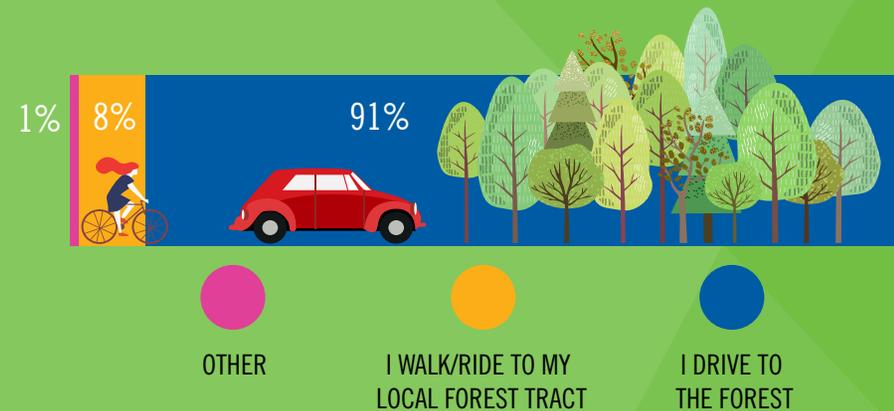
I only visit places where I can let my dog off-leash

Off-leash dogs not under control

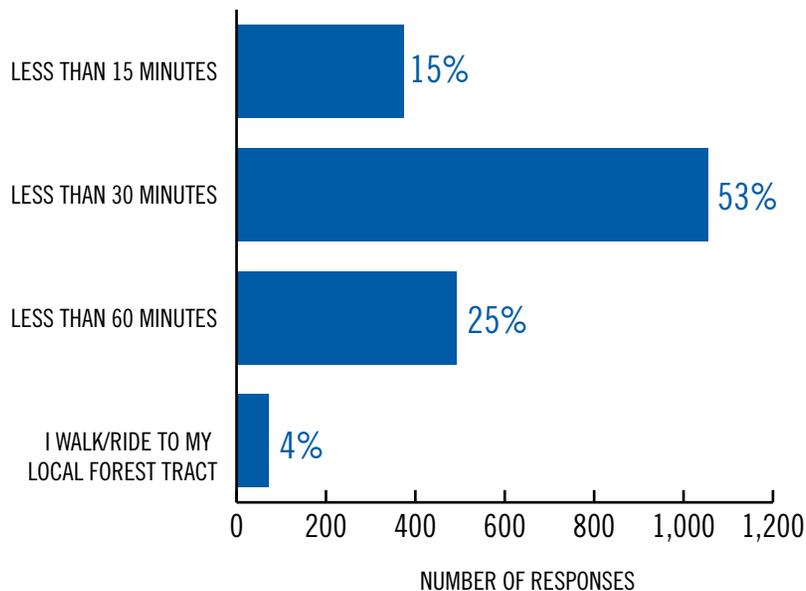
I haven't felt comfortable using the trails due to the number of off-leash dogs on the trails and the amount of dog waste that is not picked up

How do you get to the Forest?

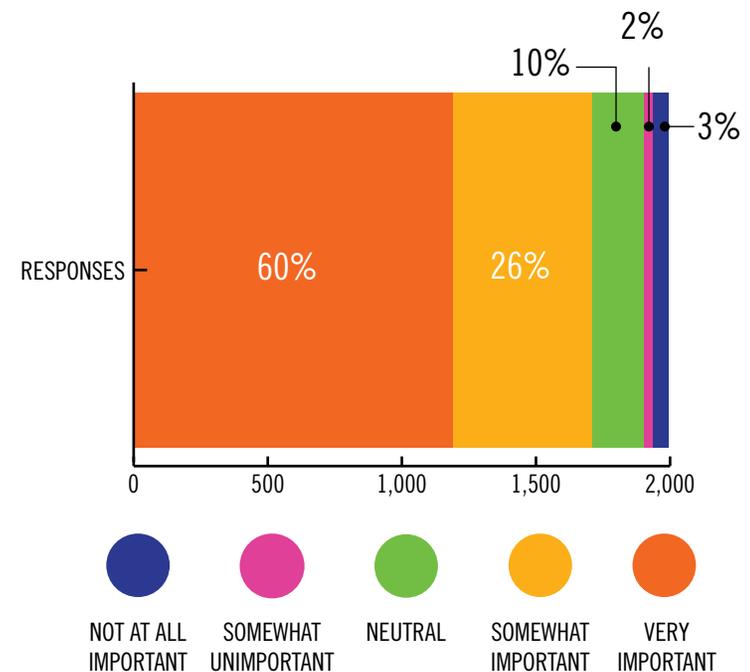
Of those that visit the York Regional Forest, 91% stated that they drive there. The average commute time for the majority of respondents (53%) was less than 30 minutes. As the vast majority of visitors to the Forest travel by car, 86% of respondents indicated that designated parking areas are important to them.



How long would you be willing to travel by car to visit any York Regional Forest tract?



How important to you is having a designated parking area at the York Regional Forest?

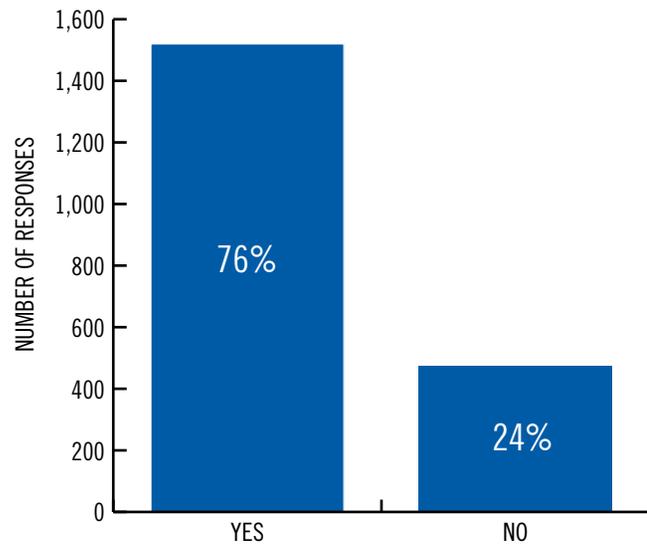


What we learned about dog owners and caregivers

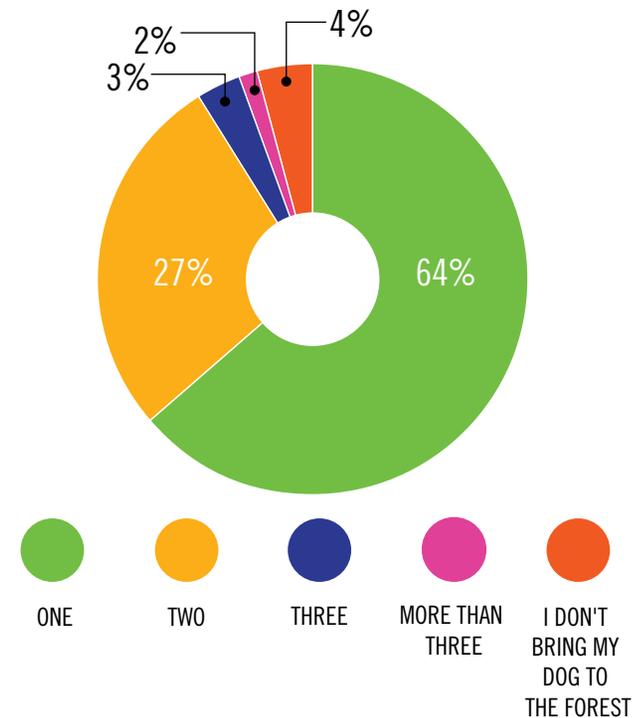
Approximately three-quarters (76%) of survey respondents are dog owners and/or caregivers (total of 1,520 respondents). Most dog owners/caregivers bring only one dog with them when they visit the York Regional Forest.



ARE YOU A DOG OWNER OR CAREGIVER?



NUMBER OF DOGS BROUGHT PER VISIT



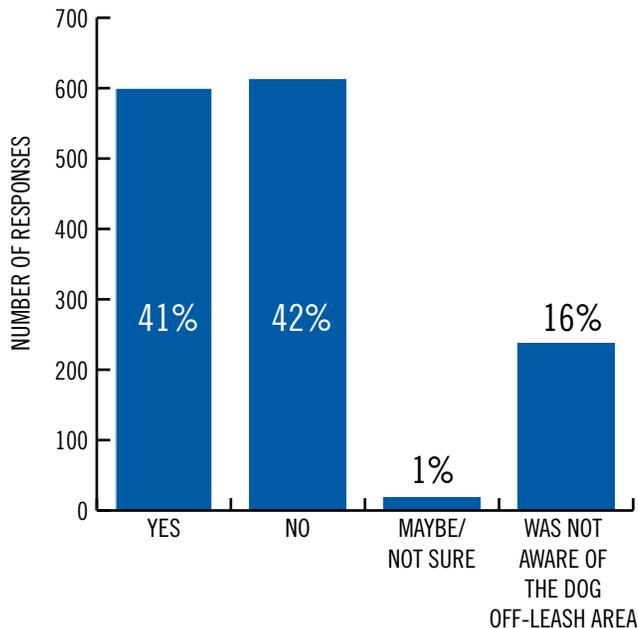
How do you feel about the dog off-leash area at the Bendor and Graves Tract?

Forest users had mixed experiences with the dog off-leash area at the Bendor and Graves Tract. In the survey, 41% of dog owners/caregivers (600 people) stated they have been to the dog off-leash area at the Bendor and Graves Tract in East Gwillimbury. Of those respondents, 66% (392 people) were satisfied or very satisfied with the dog off-leash area.

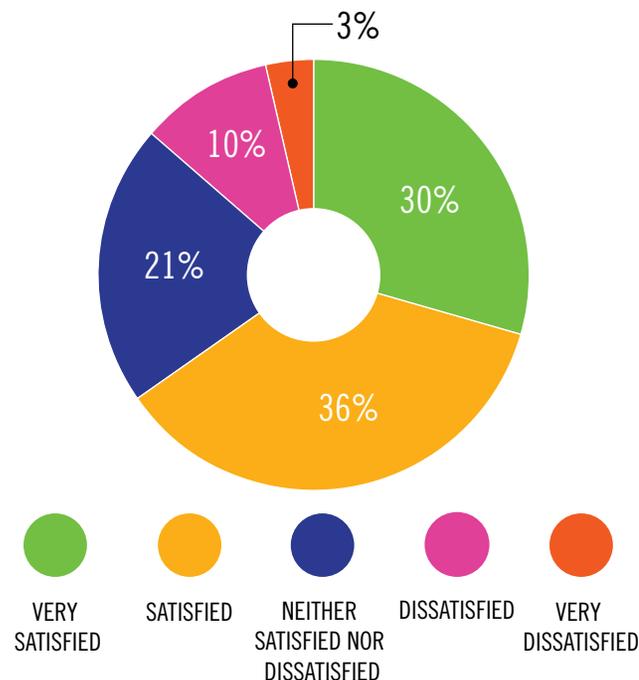
Overall, 16% of dog owners/caregivers (238 people) were not aware of the dog off-leash area at the Bendor and Graves Tract.



HAVE YOU USED THE DOG OFF-LEASH AREA?



SATISFACTION WITH THE DOG OFF-LEASH AREA

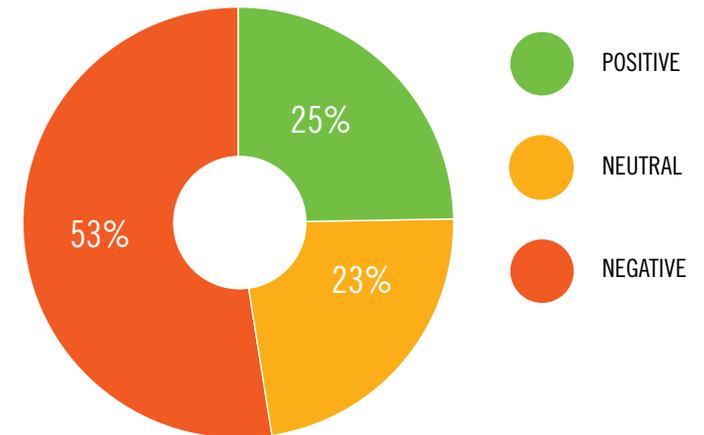


On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = not important and 10 = very important), the average rating assigned to the importance of dog off-leash areas in the York Regional Forest was 8.

Shared experiences about the dog off-leash area at the Bendor and Graves Tract

Survey respondents provided 280 comments about the dog off-leash area. Approximately 25% of received comments identified positive experiences, 23% identified neutral experiences and 53% identified negative experiences.

Specific experiences were analyzed and grouped by type; examples of the comments associated with the most frequently reported themes are provided below, along with a percentage indicating the frequency of responses.



PROBLEMS WITH AGGRESSIVE OR REACTIVE DOGS (33%)

- I have seen aggressive behaviours from other dogs that make it a stressful experience
- My dog was attacked by another
- Some of the dog owners have aggressive dogs and there is a difference between play and aggression, and they don't understand it - we no longer go in the off-leash area
- Unfixed dogs not always a good mix for other dogs

SENSE OF OVERCROWDING IN FENCED AREA (19%)

- There are too many large dogs in the fenced in area, I don't go in. It is overwhelming for my dog and some other dogs do not recall well
- It's very small and usually crowded
- Too many dogs and activity
- There are too many dogs in a confined space for my liking and it's overwhelming to our dogs sometimes

PERCEIVED INATTENTIVE DOG OWNERS (18%)

- Would be better if dog owners took responsibility for their dogs while in the enclosure. Too often I had to intervene with a "dog dispute" while the other owners were, I would assume, oblivious
- Owners need to be watching dogs carefully
- Some people are not in control of their dogs. They have no recall and run up to us

ISSUES WITH GARBAGE, WASTE, AND/OR DOG FECES (8%)

- I'm so sick and tired of garbage and masks left and people who pick up poop and then throw the bag
- This year there have been a lot of people coming to the park and not cleaning up after their dog goes poo
- A lot of people still don't pick up their dog poop
- Needs poop bag dispenser, often people don't pick up

CONCERNS REGARDING TRANSMISSION OF DISEASE (4%)

- It's a breeding ground to transfer infections from dog to dog
- Well known to be a cesspool for bacterial and airborne viruses/diseases
- A little worrisome because some people don't vaccinate their dogs
- Dog owners bring sick dogs to the park. Kennel cough is highly contagious, so we don't visit often

OTHER (18%)

- Desire for a separate space for small dogs
- Seek winter shelter and summer shade
- Requests for water fountains
- Higher/more secure fences/gates
- Allow for toys
- Provide lights in the evening

Note: Comments have been edited for clarity.

Other off-leash areas you take your dogs to

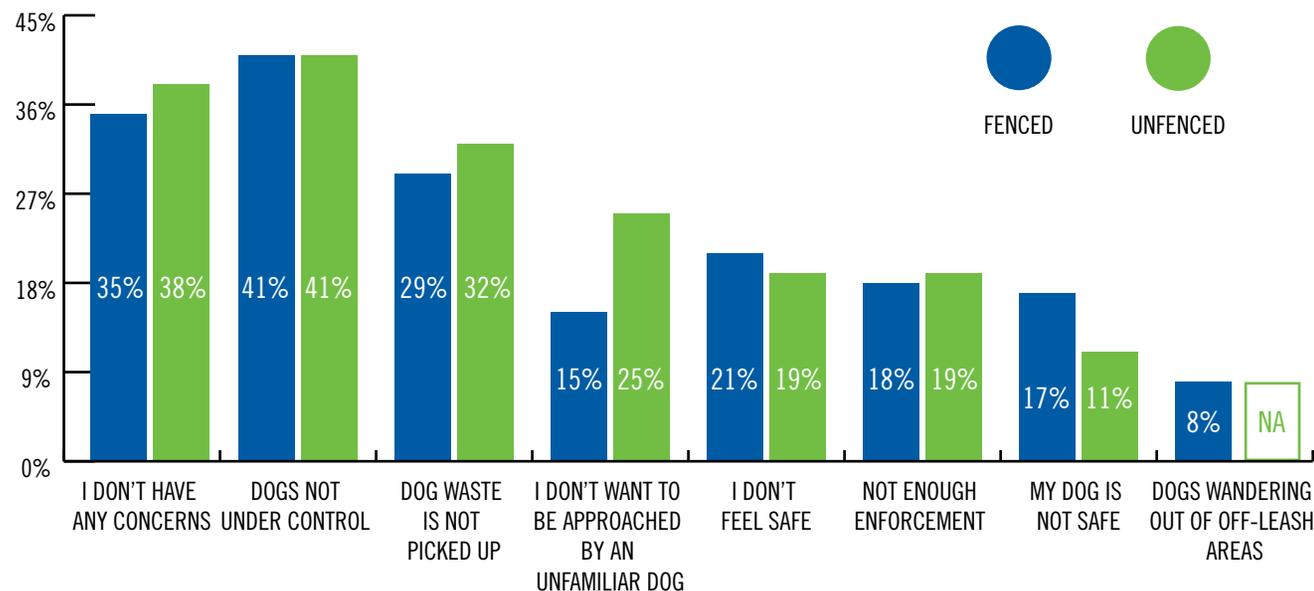
35% of dog owners/caregivers indicated they use other dog off-leash areas. Popular areas are mapped below:

1. Bow Wow Country Club
2. Brechin Dog Park, Ontario
3. Canine Commons Off Leash Dog Park
4. Cherry beach dog park
5. Concord Dog Park, Ontario
6. Durham Regional Forest
7. Earl Bales Dog Park
8. G. Ross Lord Dog Park
9. George Richardson Park
10. Georgina Leash Free Dog Park
11. Global Pet Foods off-leash park
12. Greenwood Conservation Area
13. High Park Dog Off Leash Area
14. Holland Landing Prairie Provincial Nature Reserve
15. Huntington Park Off-Leash Dog Park
16. Innisfil Dog Park
17. Ken Reid Conservation Area
18. King City Off-Leash Dog Park
19. L'Amoreaux Off-Leash Dog Park
20. Miller Avenue Off-Leash Dog Park
21. Parkway Belt Leash-Free Dog Park
22. Phyllis Rawlinson Park
23. Pickering Dog Park
24. Rougeview Dog Park
25. Scanlon Creek Bark Park
26. Simcoe County Forest - Hodgson Tract
27. Thompson Memorial Park
28. Tower Hill Dog Park
29. Uxbridge Off-Leash Dog Park
30. Willowdale Off-Leash Dog Park



Concerns about fenced and unfenced off-leash areas to help inform the options

When considering both fenced and unfenced dog off-leash areas, 41% of respondents indicated they were most concerned with 'dogs not under control'. Roughly a third (35% and 38%) of respondents reported having no concerns about either fenced or unfenced areas in York Regional Forest.

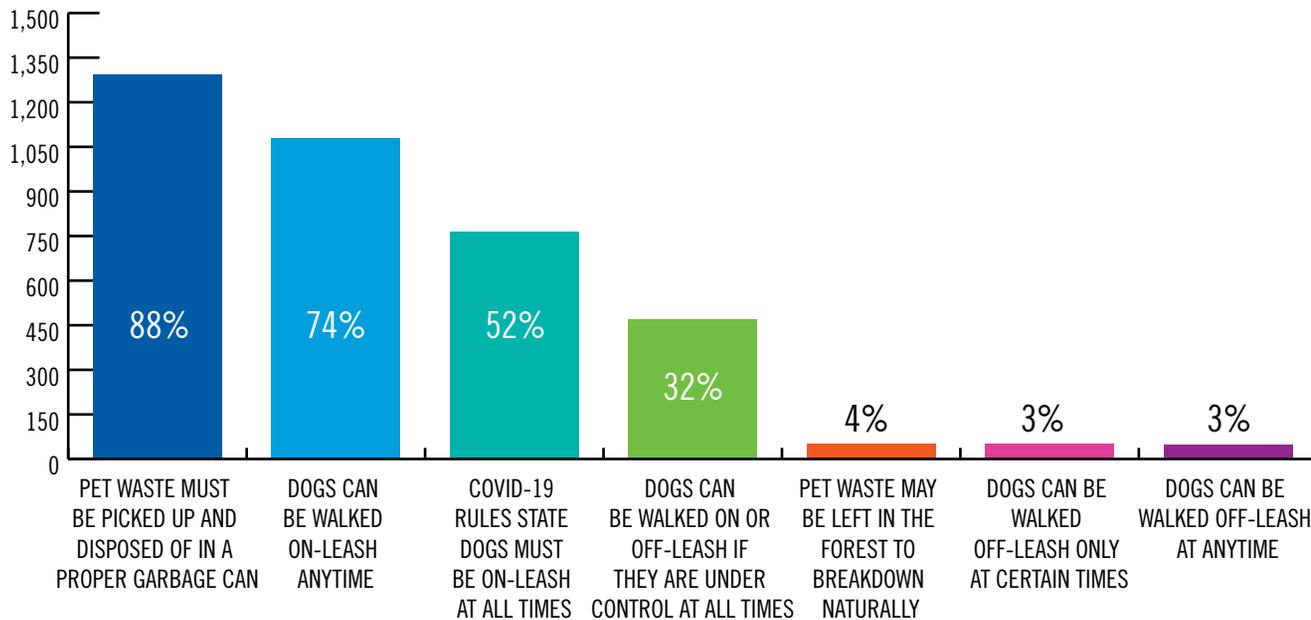


OTHERS CONCERNS EXPRESSED BY RESPONDENTS, NOT CAPTURED BY THE MULTIPLE-CHOICE RESPONSES

- The safety of young children, small dogs, horses and/or cyclists
- Concerns about disease transmission between dogs
- Overcrowding on trails and in fenced areas
- Lack of physical distancing during COVID-19
- Concerns about the amount of horse waste that is not picked up
- Maintenance and upkeep (holes not being filled, no lighting in the evenings, garbage, odours)
- Concerns for safety of wildlife from off-leash dogs

What Are York Region's guidelines for walking dogs in the York Regional Forest?

Dog owners/caregivers (1,469 people) were asked what they thought the guidelines for walking dogs in the York Regional Forest were. The majority of those, 88% (1,294 people) were aware that dog waste must be picked up and disposed of appropriately. Another 74% (1,081 people) believed that dogs could be walked on-leash anytime in the forest. A little more than half (52% or 765 people) were also aware of the COVID-19 rules that state dogs must be on-leash at all times. About a third of respondents (471 people) thought that dogs could be off-leash if they are under control at all times – pre-COVID-19 regulations. Pre-COVID-19, dogs were required to be on-leash or “under control” at all times.



The York Regional Forest is not a dog off-leash park. Regular guidelines state:

- Dogs must be under control at all times
- Dogs must be leashed around other forest users and you must carry one leash per dog at all times
- Stoop and scoop all pet waste
- Place bagged pet waste in the garbage cans located in the parking area (Do not hang or leave pet waste bags in the forest)

During COVID-19 the rules have been updated and dogs must be leashed at all times until further notice.



When asked what percentage of forest users followed pre-COVID-19 guidelines for walking dogs in the York Regional Forest, respondents thought about 54% of forest users followed the pre-COVID-19 guidelines.

What is your experience with dogs in the York Regional Forest?

Survey respondents provided 786 comments about experiences with dogs in the York Regional Forest with a range of negative, neutral and positive feedback.

Specific experiences with dogs in the Forest were analyzed and grouped by type; examples of the themes along with a percentage indicating the frequency of responses are provided below.



NEGATIVE
41%



NEUTRAL
30%



POSITIVE
28%

DANGEROUS ENCOUNTERS WITH OFF-LEASH DOGS (29%)

- Dogs off-leash are dangerous for dogs and horses
- Dogs off-leash usually run up to horses and cause a very dangerous situation
- There is almost nothing you can do if a strange dog is coming at you. It is unsafe and dangerous
- Dogs off-leash are exceptionally dangerous to cyclists as they can run out in an unpredictable manner and cause a collision

PROBLEMS WITH WASTE, GARBAGE AND/OR FECES (16%)

- Most frequent issue is waste but it's not as bad as what occurs in neighbourhoods along sidewalks. Dog waste that doesn't get picked up in town is a major problem
- Dog waste is a big problem. Instead of looking around you have to constantly be watching where you walk
- Dog waste not being picked up and garbage being left behind
- Biodegradable dog waste bags should be mandatory

PERCEPTION OF OTHER DOG OWNERS AS INATTENTIVE OR IRRESPONSIBLE (13%)

- I don't have a problem with the dogs. It's the owners that do not keep their animal under control or pick up after them
- Far too many owners are negligent
- The irresponsible dog owners ruin it for those who follow the rules
- Too many people allow their dogs off-leash and are not in control of their dogs

When asked about overall experiences with dogs in the York Regional Forest, on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = very negative and 10 = very positive), the average rating for all survey respondents was 8.

What is your experience with dogs in the York Regional Forest?

REQUEST FOR MORE OFF-LEASH AREAS (9%)

- It would be amazing if we could have at least one designated walk that was completely off-leash
- There should be more off-leash and allow dogs to exercise. Maybe have a dogless forest and a full dog forest
- I would like to see at least 2 trails dedicated to off-leash dogs. It would be nice to know if all trails are open to horse riders as my dog is terrified of horses whether he's on-leash or off

DESIRE FOR MORE ENFORCEMENT (5%)

- I saw signage to remind dog owners to keep dogs on-leash and to scoop after dogs pooped but at this point, I would only think law enforcement is more needed
- Greater enforcement is needed, as well as more off-leash areas
- There is not any enforcement, and they seem to feel entitled to be able to let their dog do what they want because "they are dogs"
- As a frequent hiker, I am horrified daily by the lack of enforcement of the rules and regulations by dog owners

SUPPORT FOR PRE-COVID-19 RULES & REGULATIONS (9%)

- The COVID-19 on-leash rules are short-sighted. Especially during off-peak hours, in less popular tracts
- I've been a YRF user for 25 years and strongly prefer pre-COVID-19 rules which allows a dog to be off-leash when not around other forest users
- I understand the need for the temporary changes to the off-leash policy due to COVID-19, but I would be extremely disappointed if they were to become permanent or even stricter
- I greatly wish to return to the pre-COVID-19 rules of being able to have dogs off-leash if you are away from other users and the dog(s) are under control

CONCERN FOR OTHER WILDLIFE (2%)

- Even if a dog is well-behaved and, on a leash, they disturb wildlife in numerous ways. Leaving their scent all over the place for starters. Not every owner picks up properly - we see this on the streets today, so it is probably worse in the forests
- We have watched dogs chasing wildlife and trampling wildflowers as owners stood by laughing
- People don't seem to be aware of the dangers of wildlife/horses/other dogs to their dogs off-leash
- Off-leash dogs really disturb the forest wildlife while roaming freely

SUPPORT FOR COVID-19 RULES & REGULATIONS (6%)

- I think you should keep the COVID-19 rules. Dogs should be on-leash at all times
- Dogs should be on-leash at all times unless in a fenced-in area
- Although many dogs are not on a leash during COVID-19 rules (30-40%), at least there is more control shown by owners than pre-COVID-19
- I really hope that rules can change so dogs MUST stay ON-LEASH on all trails, and have fines/ consequences for those who do not follow the rules

OTHER (4%)

- Comments on the increased number of forest visitors post-COVID-19
- Suggestions to ban dogs from trails altogether
- Personal safety: Dogs need to run. I run into more people that scare me than dogs. There are a few aggressive men on the trails

Your recommendations on how to manage dogs in the forest while balancing the needs of all forest users

Recommendations were provided by 1,215 of the 1,995 survey respondents. These responses were analyzed and grouped by category on the following pages. Each category includes select examples and a percentage indicating the frequency of responses.

Sixty-six recommendations were also received via social media and the comments followed the same patterns as those received via the survey.

There is support for a range of management options for dogs in the Forest. Results from this survey will help inform future options as there was no single preferred recommendation identified.

A WIDE RANGE OF SUGGESTIONS



**Dogs on-leash
at all times**



**Dogs
off-leash**

- Only in fenced areas/ designated parks
- At designated times or on certain days
- In specific areas/tracts
- Anywhere and any time

Your recommendations on how to manage dogs in the forest while balancing the needs of all forest users *(continued)*

OFF-LEASH IN SPECIFIC FOREST AREAS OR TRACTS (19%)

- Designated trails that allow dogs to be off-leash
- It would be great to have some off-leash trails within the forest, similar to how some of the trails now have designated trails for bike riders
- Make one forest area an "official" off-leash walking trail where owners with high energy dogs can walk a trail, not fenced in
- I would suggest having a designated forest hiking trails where dogs can be off-leash and enjoy a run

OFF-LEASH AT DESIGNATED TIMES OR ON CERTAIN DAYS (6%)

- Designated times of the day that are "off-leash" allowed
- I would like to see specific trails, with specified times that dogs can be off-leash
- Perhaps limit the times that unleashed dogs can visit the forests, i.e., before 11:00 a.m. and after 2:00 p.m. Create a complete ban on dogs between 11:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m. so that people who are frightened of dogs whether leashed or not can enjoy the forest

ON-LEASH AT ALL TIMES (17%)

- If this is how it is during the COVID-19 rules, I will be hesitant to return if rules are relaxed
- Continuing with the COVID-19 rules of all dogs being leashed on walking trails is fair
- I would recommend that the forests be designated on-leash at all times, and not just during COVID-19
- I think current rules and protocols are appropriate

OFF-LEASH ONLY IN FENCED AREAS (6%)

- Provide fenced-in off-leash areas for pets to run freely but enforce on-leash restrictions in the larger trail system
- Offer beautifully fenced areas like McCowan
- I would like to see more fenced off-leash locations for dog owners to use for off-leash running of their pets

DESIRE FOR MORE ENFORCEMENT (15%)

- Fines for infractions should increase tenfold
- Offenders website for dog-owners who have been convicted and fined
- Dogs involved in attacks on humans should be put down
- More police and enforcement officers in the forest and at entrances to make sure dogs are on-leash
- Tickets should be given when dogs are off-leash in on-leash areas

OFF-LEASH AT ANY TIME (14%)

- Return to pre-COVID-19 rules regarding off-leash walking
- Pre-COVID-19 for the most part the majority of walkers in the forest were dog walkers
- There should be designated York regional forests for dog walking off-leash and in control at all times
- Pre-COVID-19 guidelines are reasonable and appropriate
- Dogs that are under control while off-leash are not the issue. The dogs of responsible dog owners (the majority) should not lose out on essential exercise
- Most dog owners are thoughtful about leashing their dogs when people approach. It would be unfortunate to eliminate off-leash walks for the majority of dogs who enjoy shuffling along smelling things at their own pace



Your recommendations on how to manage dogs in the forest while balancing the needs of all forest users *(continued)*

DESIRE FOR BETTER SIGNAGE (6%)

- Better signage about dog owner responsibilities and rules
- Clearer signage at all the entrances of trails
- Signage indicating where there are horses so that the dogs do not spook them
- Signage regarding dog waste pick up
- Large signage insisting on poop scooping and proper disposal
- Signage posted about user risk should be stated

NEED FOR GARBAGE BINS AND/OR POOP BAGS AND PAILS (6%)

- If there were more garbage cans throughout the trails people may be more apt to throw their dog poop out
- More garbage cans throughout the trails - people may be more apt to throw their dog poop out
- Dog poop bag dispensers at parking lots to reinforce collection
- More dispensers of biodegradable bags

SEEKING MORE EDUCATION AND TRAINING (2%)

- Mandatory training courses for new dog owners
- Education plan to teach dog owners whether their dog is safe to be off-leash
- Mandatory behaviour classes for owners of rescue dogs
- Positive animal/human interaction training

OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS (11%)

FOR AMENITIES

- I think dividing the off-leash areas into a larger big dog area and smaller dog area would help nervous small dog owners
- Would benefit from a water source for filling water and washing dog paws
- Access to a port-a-potty in the spring and summer
- A shelter to stand in the winter would be nice
- Hand sanitizer pump installed at the off-leash areas
- The benches also have to be replaced as they are disintegrating
- Create an option for dogs to swim
- Create more accessible off-leash areas

FOR DOGS

- Visible license tags so that dogs especially aggressive ones and their owners can be identified
- Off-leash muzzle rules
- E-collars (electric training collars)
- Revoke licenses when infractions occur
- Dog owners must be compelled to carry minimum \$1M 3rd party (liability) insurance
- Use security cameras to enforce on-leash
- Ban dogs: I'm starting to feel it would be best if dogs weren't permitted at that tract
- Have forests where no dogs are allowed

FOR THE TRAILS

- Keep bikes off the trails
- Off-leash areas that are supervised. Have people sign in so that if there is an issue, they can be contacted
- Maybe some sort of in the forest under control enforcement test. Fine only those who have to shout at their dogs repeatedly for the dog to come to heel?
- Create new tracts all together - feel it's crowded
- Introduce a "user pay" system that dog owners can contribute to in order to keep forests available to dogs. This money could be used to pay for waste receptacles and maintenance of the forests
- Create parking fees for non-resident

Location of respondents by postal code







ABOUT DOGS IN THE YORK REGIONAL FOREST

Before COVID-19, the York Regional Forest rule stated dogs must be on-leash or under control in the Forest.

During COVID-19, this rule changed to state dogs in the York Regional Forest must be leashed at all times, except at the Dog Off-leash area at the Bendor and Graves Forest Tract.

If you have questions, please contact Access York at 1-877-464-9675 or AccessYork@york.ca

Thank you for taking the time to give us your feedback!

The Region is committed to providing a variety of engagement opportunities that capture the diversity of opinions related to walking dogs on or off-leash in the York Regional Forest.

Results outlined in this report will help to frame the future options for managing dogs in the York Regional Forest.

These recommendations will be presented, and feedback welcomed, through a range of engagement opportunities coming Spring 2021.

Stay tuned! We'd love to hear your thoughts.



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