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**Wisconsinites Went Outdoors in the Pandemic. How Should Policymakers Respond?**

*Park and trail use, fishing, hunting license and sporting goods sales up in 2020*

Wisconsinites increased participation in outdoor activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, and while the durability of this shift is uncertain, policymakers may wish to consider it as they craft state and local budgets for public lands and recreational and conservation programs, according to a new Wisconsin Policy Forum report.

With unemployment soaring and many activities curtailed, outdoor pastimes were among the few available while maintaining social distance. Park visits, sporting goods sales, and fishing licenses all shot upward especially during the early months of the pandemic.

Much of this trend may subside once employment and indoor entertainment options revert to pre-pandemic levels. Yet some of the increase could prove durable enough to ease strained budgets in these areas, helping to boost visitor fee revenues for state parks and conservation funding from hunting and fishing license fees.

The report also suggests state and local officials may “want to give thought to whether spending levels on parks, public lands, boat ramps, and other green space are adequate to handle the high demand.”

Notably, lawmakers must decide in the coming months whether to renew the state’s Stewardship program that funds purchases of public lands and improvements on them.

**Getting outdoors**

While data in some areas are more conclusive than others, of particular note is the wide scope of outdoor activities showing increased participation:

- After years of decreases in fishing license sales, Wisconsin saw a substantial jump in 2020. From March 2020 through January 2021, the state saw a 13.2% increase over the same period of 2019 in fishing license sales to state residents, which reached their highest level in at least five years. Also up were licenses sold to out-of-state and first-time anglers.
- License sales for deer hunting and first-time hunting licenses increased in 2020, particularly notable given their previous downward trends.
- Sales of state park vehicle stickers rose more than 42% in 2020 from 2019. From last April through December, annual trailpass sales for all-terrain and utility terrain vehicles rose 32.7% over 2019, hitting their highest level in a decade of available data.
- Activity in, and visits to, local and federal public spaces across Wisconsin also saw notable increases. Examples include sales of cross-country ski permits in the city of Madison, bike path use in Racine County and New Berlin, and visits to the Saint Croix National Scenic Riverway.
- The DNR reports downloads of popular phone applications for birdwatchers have seen year-over-year increases that far outpace those of recent years.

While it is too early to tell if these increases herald a long-term increase in outdoor activity, state sales tax collections may offer a modest clue: they show sales at sporting goods stores up markedly in much of 2020. National data also show increases in federal excise taxes collected on

fishing, boating, hunting, and shooting products. These data hold out at least a possibility that, as Wisconsinites become better outfitted for outdoor activity, their interest might outlast COVID-19.

## Funding for public lands

The report also examined recent data on state and local funding for outdoor programs and found:

- In the 2015-17 state budget, the state cut \$4.7 million in state tax funding out of the parks system – nearly 28% of the parks budget at that time. Most, but not all, of that was restored through an estimated \$3.2 million increase in fees on parks users.
- U.S. Census Bureau data show Wisconsin ranks in the bottom half of states for parks and recreation operating spending overall and second to last for spending at the state level. Data from the National Association of State Park Directors (NASPD) show that despite more than three state park visits per capita (19th overall), Wisconsin's state government spends just \$1.20 in state park operations per visitor – the second-lowest amount of any state in the country.
- The uptick in outdoor pursuits has led the DNR to request budget increases to support state and local ATV trails. The state may also wish to consider additional policies and programming to help keep the surge of new anglers and hunters engaged in those sports.
- Between 2000 and 2018, increases in spending for parks and recreation by counties and municipalities in Wisconsin modestly outpaced their rise in overall operating and capital spending. Moving forward, much of what happens with spending on parks operations likely will depend on local governments, since they shoulder most of that responsibility in Wisconsin.

The state plays a significant role in financing capital spending for land purchases or facilities through the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship program, which uses bonding to finance state and local land purchases for public recreation and environmental conservation as well as improvements on public lands. In 2019, the Forum examined the Stewardship program and found it facing several key financial challenges, including sharply decreased allotments for borrowing, declining expenditures on land purchases, and rising debt levels.

## What's next

Lawmakers and Evers now must decide whether and how to reauthorize the Stewardship program, set to expire on June 30, 2022. In his 2021-23 budget bill, Evers is proposing to more than double the authorized borrowing for the program to \$70 million per year and shift how that funding is divided up.

In other areas, officials could look to enhance collaboration across local governments to provide parks and recreation amenities. If policymakers wish to consider increasing revenue for these programs, options could include increasing park and camping user fees; expanding the amount of privately run indoor lodging at state parks, or allowing more sponsorships and advertisements. Larger changes could include replacing vehicle admission sticker and state trail passes with individual park admission passes, or letting motorists buy a state parks sticker when renewing their vehicle registration.

Neighboring Minnesota offers a model for more robust investment in outdoor programs: Its voters in 2008 passed a sales tax of 0.375% to fund priorities that include conservation, clean water, parks and trails, ensuring clean water, and the arts.

Go here to read our new report, [“Take it Outside: Pandemic Spurs Outdoor Pursuits.”](#)

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