*Fiscal Facts by Wisconsin Policy Forum*

**Wisconsinites increased outdoor activities during pandemic**

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.

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 if at least some share of the increase proves durable, the implications could be significant. As they begin crafting upcoming budgets, 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 recent increase in demand.

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 shift 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 shows increases in federal excise taxes collected on fishing, boating, hunting, and shooting products.

This data holds out at least a possibility that, as Wisconsinites become better outfitted for outdoor activity, their interest might outlast COVID-19.

*This information is provided to Wisconsin Newspaper Association members as a service of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state’s leading resource for nonpartisan state and local government research and civic education. Learn more at wispolicyforum.org.*