**Fiscal Facts: Staying engaged in outdoor pursuits**

At the height of the pandemic, Wisconsin saw a surge of increased participation in a range of outdoor pursuits. And even as the pandemic receded, by 2023, Wisconsinites still were exceeding pre-pandemic rates of participation in pastimes such as fishing and visiting state parks.

Hunting and fishing license sales increased in 2020 and 2021; in the years since, they have fallen from their pandemic peak. But in 2023, hunting license sales remained about even with their pre-pandemic 2019 levels -- while fishing license sales were slightly above pre-pandemic levels.

The data suggests that after a brief increase during the acute phase of the pandemic, hunting and fishing license sales returned to their long-term declining trajectory. However, the news is more positive when comparing actual 2023 levels to where they would be if the pre-pandemic trajectory of declining sales had continued.

Large increases in state park use, meanwhile, have persisted after the pandemic. State park sticker sales in 2023 remained nearly 50% higher than in 2019. And notably, they modestly increased from 2022 to 2023.

Looking closely at the types of stickers sold, two noteworthy trends appear. First is the rapid expansion of senior and reduced rate state park stickers, which can partially be explained by the state’s aging population, for whom state parks can be a more accessible option for outdoor recreation.

Second, while nonresident sticker purchases have declined from the record highs of 2020, they are 53% higher than the previous high in 2019, and nearly double the annual sales between 2007 and 2018. These nonresident sales are especially important to the state’s tourism economy, as they represent visitors who bring money from out of state, often to rural areas.

Not all indicators are showing strength. Sales of outdoor equipment, for example, dropped more than 2.7% from 2022 to 2023 after having surged in 2020 and 2021. This fits with a picture in which new or renewed outdoor enthusiasts purchased gear early in the pandemic. Because items such as bikes, kayaks, fishing rods, and duck decoys are durable and can be used season after season, the need for new gear may have dropped, resulting in fewer sales in recent years.

Funds from license fees and park entry passes add up quickly, with hunting and fishing approvals accounting for more than $68 million in funding for the state’s conservation fund, while entry and camping fees associated with the state parks bring in approximately $28 million each year. These pots of money generally pay for management work associated with the activity. Revenue from fishing license sales pays for conservation work such as fish hatchery management, while state park pass sales pay for work such as grounds maintenance at the parks.

As the mix of participation has changed slowly, revenue from parks-based recreation has increased while hunting and fishing revenue has slowly declined. The trend of increased state park use may prompt leaders to consider expanding such opportunities. For hunting and fishing license purchases, meanwhile, the return of declining participation raises anew the question of how the state will fund those priorities in the future.

*This information is 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*](https://wispolicyforum.org/research/state-tax-burden-up-but-overall-burden-still-falling/)*.*