



# Borough Businesses Benefitted from Pandemic-Related Outdoor Recreation

By Jessica Aiello, Contributing Writer, Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation

The COVID-19 pandemic has had many negative consequences, but there was at least one silver lining. People looking for safe, healthy ways to unwind from all the daily stress and confusion discovered the outdoors, and state parks and forests, in particular.

According to the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), visits to PA state parks increased by 26% in 2020, over the previous year (or 7.4 million visits), for a total of 46 million visitors.

Some parks experienced even greater attendance, such as Cherry Springs in Potter County, which had an increase of 231%, and Hickory Run in Carbon County, which had an increase of 137%.

The impacts in state forests are more difficult to quantify, as they are larger in area than state parks, with visitors more dispersed. However, Ellen Shultzabarger, state forester and director of the Bureau of Forestry, said that what officials do know is that these

forests experienced an almost 30% increase in camping in 2020, and parking lots and trail access points were continuously filled.

DCNR sources also showed that outdoor recreation equipment sales skyrocketed during the pandemic.

## Why so Popular?

Why did so many people find value in outdoor recreation facilities like state parks and forests?

“Spending time in the outdoors has repeatedly been shown to reduce stress while also benefiting our physical, mental, and emotional health,” said Marci Mowery, president of the Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation (PPFF). “We at the foundation witnessed people not just using the outdoors as a means to exercise, but as a safe, socially-distanced way to connect with family and friends.”

Not just people benefited from this surge in outdoor recreation. Places like Pocono Whitewater in Jim Thorpe Borough, Carbon

County, saw an increase in business.

For more than 40 years, the business has been a popular source for whitewater rafting, bike rentals, and other outdoor experiences. While the pandemic affected them, their proximity to Lehigh Gorge State Park helped keep their business afloat.

Nikki Hurley, director of marketing, said they saw an increase in mid-week traffic in 2020, and it was clear people were looking to be outside.

“Having park access and our brand within the park is important to people. It has a large impact because visitors know the park is regulated and adhering to state guidelines [regarding COVID-19]. They know it’s a safe place to go for recreation,” said Hurley.

The mutually beneficial relationship between state parks and local businesses highlights the economic benefits state parks and forests have on the boroughs and the Commonwealth as a whole.

## Travel Industry Winners, Losers

Travel-related spending during the pandemic was not consistent across the Commonwealth, according to Jonathan Johnson, senior policy analyst for The Center for Rural Pennsylvania.

His research found that overall, there was a 1.1% decline in the travel industry between 2019 and 2020, but in more urban areas, there was an increase, albeit minor (0.3%).

This may be due to people staying closer to home to recreate, with higher population densities in urban areas correlating to greater usage in urban parks. It may also be due to out-of-state visitors heading to urban parks to spend the day or weekend.

Pennsylvania made a strategic decision to keep its state parks and forests open during the pandemic, putting in place COVID-19 safety protocols, while some nearby states closed their park and forest gates.

“Out-of-state visitors to [state parks and forests] was new money for the Pennsylvania economy,” said Andrew Mowen, professor in the Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Management at Penn State. “Economic impact is dependent on park visitation levels, which increased quite a bit during the pandemic. Local businesses that figured out how to operate online or change their business model to handle the pandemic restrictions benefited in 2020.”



One of the businesses benefiting from increased state park visitation was Hawghead Marine and Tackle Center, Wellsville Borough, York County, near Gifford Pinchot State Park. Additionally, the county added 10 new travel-related businesses during the pandemic, according to The Center for Rural Pennsylvania.

During 2020, Hawghead’s owner Rick Anderson could tell there was increased visitation to Pinchot Park, which was overall “a positive to the business,” nearly doubling their revenue from the year before.

“We’re very blessed that we’re on the positive end of this,” said Anderson, “because the fishing industry overall has really taken a hit. Companies can’t catch up to meet the demand for lures, bobbers, and other gear. Overall, I hope that people continue to come out and enjoy the state parks [even after the pandemic ends].”

This shortage of some outdoor recreational gear may explain

why some travel-related businesses shuttered. Still, many thrived.

Tackett’s by the Lake, near Prince Gallitzin State Park in Patton Borough, Cambria County, had its best sales year in 2020, according to owner Joe Tackett. The company provides a number of goods and services, including golf carts, sign making, blacksmithing, metal working, and a gift shop that sells items like campfire accessories. He attributed this success to his proximity to the park.

From conversations Tackett had with customers, he learned people were camping as a way to enjoy a vacation in a safe environment. Those campers stopped by his business to purchase accessories for their campsite.

“Customers are in a good mood by coming to the park, enjoying what they have,” said Tackett, “and happy customers translates to more business.”

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These businesses who flourished in 2020 were not outliers.

According to Dave Sariano, director of business services for DCNR's Bureau of State Parks, in a January *TheBurg* magazine, "The total [annual] contribution in [state park and forest] visitor spending to the state economy is \$1.145 billion ... and in 2020 it would have been way up from that."

### Boroughs, Travel-Related Businesses

An Outdoor Industry Association (OIA) report released in the spring of 2021 gathered insights about American's outdoor activity engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their research showed that three out of five new outdoor recreation participants planned to continue their newfound hobbies after the pandemic ended.

However, the report also showed that the biggest barriers for people to continue their activities post-pandemic include "a lack of information about where to go, how to participate, and whom to participate with."

If local businesses and governments can provide this sort of information to visitors, they may stay engaged and bring along friends and family. Pro-outdoor recreation organizations like DCNR and PPFF can provide boroughs with useful resources to help them benefit from their proximity to a state park and/or forest.

For more information on outdoor recreation during the pandemic, visit [paparksandforests.org/our-work/stewardship/covid-19](https://paparksandforests.org/our-work/stewardship/covid-19).

**About the author:** Jessica Aiello is a freelance communications professional working on a contractual basis for the Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation, along with other clients. In this role she researches and writes grants, writes social media content, press releases, and articles, and assists with other outreach materials as needed.

Aiello spent nearly 10 years working for the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, managing sustainability, climate change, and other environmental issues, and has worked with clients ranging from small engineering and landscape architecture firms to environmental consulting firms. B

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