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Purple Pa. might be divided, but not when it comes to this | Opinion

Kate Harper Your Turn

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Key Points

A recent poll shows 94% of Pennsylvanians agree on the importance of state parks and forests.

This near-unanimous support crosses political, age, and demographic lines within the state.

Advocates highlight this public consensus as state budget negotiations approach a June 30 deadline.

A majority of voters, 86%, believe funding for public lands should be a state government priority.

In this, the 250th year of our nation’s existence, politics causes daily and even hourly disagreements and disputes. People are angry enough to march, protest, shout and even argue at the family dinner table (or refuse to talk to others with different viewpoints). So, a recent poll in Pennsylvania, a “purple state” with plenty of Republicans, Democrats and Independents with strong political feelings, showing near unanimity as we approach the historic anniversary (itself accompanied by debates, discourse and disagreements) is actually very good news.

When it comes to their feelings about state parks and forests, Pennsylvanians are nearly unanimous in their belief that, whether they use the state parks and forests themselves or not, they are important to the environment and overall health of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Maybe we shouldn’t be surprised — the name of the state literally means “Penn’s Woods” — and the [Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources](#) maintains more than 300,000 acres of state parks and 2.3 million acres of state forests, and that doesn’t even count the 1 million acres of state game lands in Pennsylvania, cared for by the Game Commission.

A recent poll by Susquehanna Polling and Research found that 94% of Pennsylvanians thought these open public lands were “very important” (85%) or “somewhat important” (10%) for an astonishing total of 94%. That number includes Republican, Democrats, Independents and people of all ages and ethnic groups. What else do 94% of us agree on? Sure, you might be thinking, it’s not surprising that people like open, natural, beautiful landscapes whether they visit them or not. Why is that news? Well, it’s budget season in Harrisburg, and unlike the federal budget, the state budget must balance revenues and expenditures every year by the June 30th deadline. It isn’t going to be easy this year with planned expenditures outpacing planned revenues by nearly \$5 billion. There are only two ways to balance the budget — increase revenues (higher taxes or deficit spending) or cut expenditures. Neither is popular.

This time of year, the legislature is under siege by program participants and groups who don’t want their needs (and expenses) cut to make the budget balance. It’s tough to sort it out. But, as a funny looking green creature named The Lorax once put it in a Dr. Seuss children’s book, “Who will speak for the trees?”

That’s where the polling data comes in. The poll was conducted on behalf of the Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation, a charitable organization that has hardworking volunteers and encourages donated funding to help with the care of the parks and forests. But they can’t do it all.

In addition to likely voters indicating that public lands were important, 86% of likely Pennsylvania voters believe that funding for state parks and forests should be a priority of state government. This strong support is consistent across party identification (87% of Republicans and 85% of Democrats), age, gender, geographic region, and ethnicity.

Recently, PPFF held its annual awards banquet at Little Buffalo State Park in Newport, Pennsylvania, to honor folks from across the commonwealth for their volunteer efforts to maintain trails, encourage inclusion, add disability features like accessible boat ramps, and organize volunteer work at the state parks and forest. It was a great night with people openly acknowledging how much they love their state park or forest and claiming ownership of it with their hard work.

If you love your state park or forest, make your voice heard and "speak for the trees." Let your legislators know how much the care and maintenance of Pennsylvania’s natural treasures mean to you and your family, so funding for parks and forests remains a priority.

Kate Harper is a former state representative from Montgomery County and a member of the [Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation](#) board of directors.