



Wisconsin Department of Tourism

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, strong summer recreation activity bodes well for socially distanced winter activities such as snowshoeing.

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

As COVID-19 hangs on, Wisconsin's economy benefits from increasing interest in outdoor recreation, weather permitting.

BY **KIMBERLY HAZEN**

Canceled European trips, rescheduled weddings, and limited gatherings had people flocking to outdoor activities throughout the summer at increasing numbers, according to studies from Outdoor Recreation Roundtable. The national organization found that in 2019, 50% of Americans enjoyed outdoor activities, and through the COVID-19 pandemic, that number grew more than 81%, with 32% trying something new outdoors for the first time. Clearly, people could not wait to get out of the house.

In addition, a Headwaters Economics report commissioned by the recently formed Office of Outdoor Recreation in the Wisconsin Department of Tourism reinforced that outdoor recreation in Wisconsin means business. For example, 17,000 annual visits to state parks created an economic impact of more than \$1 billion. Equipment, licenses, passes, lodging, and restaurants are some of the most obvious sources of economic infusion, although the latter is limited right now.

The pace of the outdoor recreation industry is growing faster than the overall national economy, and this was true even before the pandemic hit. In Wisconsin, the outdoor economy grew by 12%, compared to 7% growth by the state's overall economy. "What we saw since COVID is a record number of people getting outdoors and seeking safe, wide-open spaces," says Mary Monroe Brown, director of the Office of Outdoor Recreation.

So, what will happen as winter locks in? Abby Haas, economic development and tourism director for Lafayette County, is also the tourism chair for Gov. Tony Evers' Snowmobile Recreation Council. Haas is optimistic

about the upcoming snowmobile season. "It is already a socially-distanced sport and snowmobilers are pros when it comes to masks since balaclavas and helmets are standard riding equipment."

However, Haas added that actual wintry weather is a determining factor for the success of the season. "We need a good six inches of snow to provide a base before groomers can even head out, but volunteers are already busy signing trails so when it does snow, everyone is ready to ride."

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In Mount Horeb, Nathan McGree, general manager of Tyrol Basin, admits the 70-degree days of November weren't ideal but based on advance season pass sales, volume at the annual used equipment sale, and preseason equipment sales, this year is shaping up to be the busiest yet.

"All indicators show that people are dying to get out and ski," McGree says.

In addition to snowmobiling and downhill skiing, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing are also expected to be popular this winter, according to Brown. "We all want to live in communities where people are happy and connected," she says. "The more we're outside getting fresh air, the more that's going to happen." **IE**