

# STAYING ENGAGED IN OUTDOOR PURSUITS

*Days spent outdoors gave solace to state residents and visitors during the pandemic closures in 2020 and 2021, resulting in a rise in state park use, hunting and fishing license sales, and outdoor gear purchases. Since the pandemic ended and other pastimes resumed, some outdoor activities have returned closer to pre-COVID levels. Though sales of outdoor recreation equipment fell slightly in 2023, the data overall suggest that conservation and outdoor recreation remain a priority for the public and an issue to watch for policymakers.*

Wisconsinites took to the outdoors in record numbers during the darkest months of the pandemic, turning to the natural world for one of their few remaining options for fun. While some of the massive increases seen in 2020 and 2021 have receded, people are still enjoying themselves outside more than before the pandemic through pastimes such as hunting, fishing, and visiting state parks.

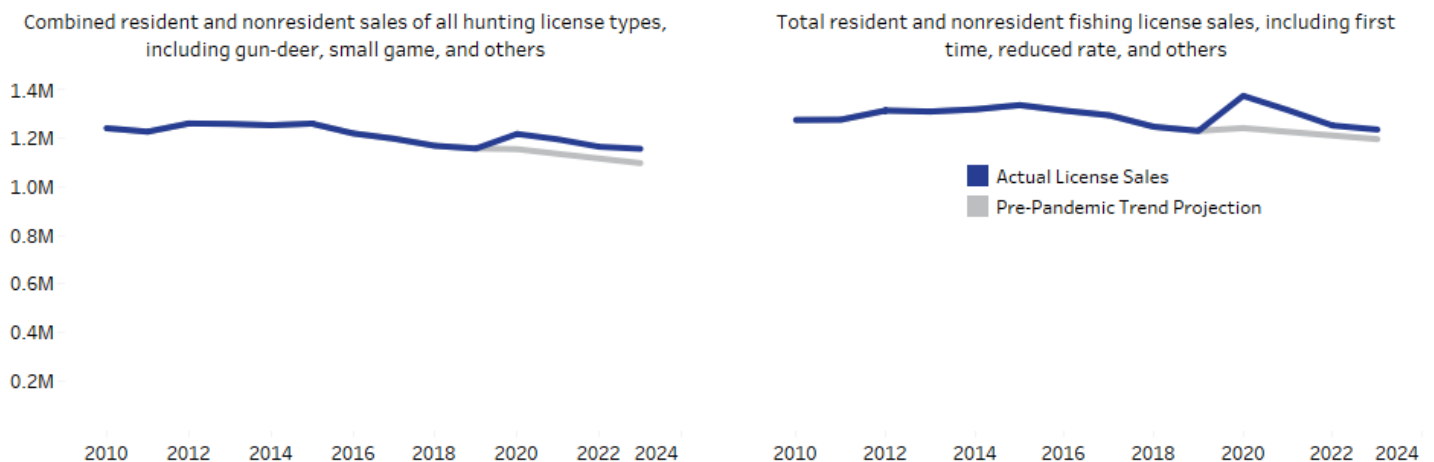
Both Wisconsin residents and visitors to the state have a long tradition of participating in outdoor pursuits such as hunting, fishing, camping, motorized and non-motorized trail use, and other activities at some of the [highest rates](#) in the country. These activities [contribute billions](#) to Wisconsin’s economy and bring tourists to destinations across the state. Fees generated by these activities through license sales or access passes have been vital in protecting the natural environment and maintaining recreational activities, paying for work such as habitat management, fish stocking, trail

maintenance, public land acquisition, and the state’s game wardens. Recent upticks in participation resulted in more funds becoming available for these activities.

For state park use, the pandemic supercharged a long-term upward trend, and the post-pandemic dip was relatively small. But for hunting and fishing, where participation had been shrinking for years before the pandemic, COVID-19 appears to have slowed but not reversed that long-term decline. Total license sales are now even with purchase numbers from before the pandemic – a relatively positive outcome that is better than the pre-pandemic trend.

Together, these data suggest a continuation of an ongoing shift in which activities such as hiking, camping, bird watching, and cycling are taking the place of hunting and fishing. This shift has implications for how we might pay for conservation as well as ensuring access to public lands and parks.

**Figure 1: Wisconsin Hunting and Fishing License Sales Have Dropped but Outpace Pre-Pandemic Trends**



Source: Wisconsin DNR. Note: Excludes any hunting or fishing stamp purchases.



Not all indicators are showing strength. Sales of outdoor equipment, for example, dropped more than 2.7% from 2022 to 2023. Yet the overall numbers for recreation outdoors, plus the importance of these pastimes to the state's culture and economy, suggest that conservation and parks should remain on the minds of policymakers.

In this brief, we use data from the Wisconsin Departments of Natural Resources and Revenue to check in on trends in participation and equipment sales we identified as part of past research on [conservation funding](#) and [outdoor recreation](#).

## OUTDOOR RECREATION STILL STRONG

Hunting and fishing license sales have fallen noticeably since the highs of 2020 and 2021, but are still even or slightly ahead of total license sales in 2019. The news is even more positive when 2023 levels are compared to where they would be if the pre-pandemic trend of declining sales had continued.

Figure 1 on the previous page shows the long-term trend in sales for both license types, which matter because the revenue from them helps pay for various conservation efforts.

Admittedly, the past two years have seen year-over-year drops in sales of both types. Yet 2023 fishing license sales, while only 0.5% higher than 2019, are an estimated 3.2% higher than they would have been had they not broken with the pre-pandemic trend. In another positive sign, first-time fishing license sales in 2023 totaled 103,367, below the more than 170,000 purchased in 2020, but 28.3% higher than first-time licenses sold in 2019. This suggests new or lapsed participants are still being drawn into the sport, as anyone who goes more than 10 years without purchasing a fishing license is eligible for a first-time license.

Hunting license sales in 2023 are 0.1% below total sales from 2019, but are an estimated 5.1% above what they would be if the pre-pandemic decline had continued. New hunter recruitment, as measured by first-time gun-deer purchases, outpaced 2019 by 6.3%. While this is good news for conservation

funding, 2023 first-time sales still trailed every year but 2018 and 2019 since first-time licenses became available in 2012. This dip suggests that long-term hunting recruitment is still trending downward as current hunters age and younger state residents pursue other pastimes.

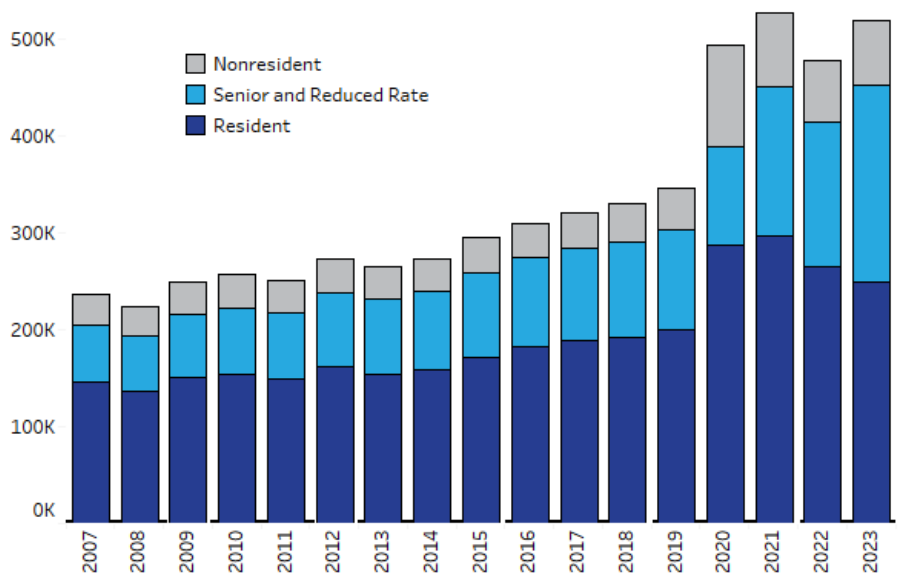
While hunting and fishing purchases have dropped back to pre-pandemic levels, state park use remains elevated. Figure 2 shows the massive jump in state park use has persisted, as evidenced by the nearly 50% greater total state park sticker sales in 2023 compared to 2019, and the year-over-year increase between 2022 and 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. As the population continues to age, this access will become more important. These reduced rate stickers, while attractive to eligible buyers, do lessen the positive benefits on funding for state park operations and maintenance.

Second, while nonresident sticker purchases are 36.7% lower than the record highs of 2020, they are still 53% higher than the previous high in 2019, and nearly

**Figure 2: State Park Pass Sales Remain High Post-Pandemic**

Total state park annual admission sticker sales by type, 2007-2023



Source: Wisconsin DNR



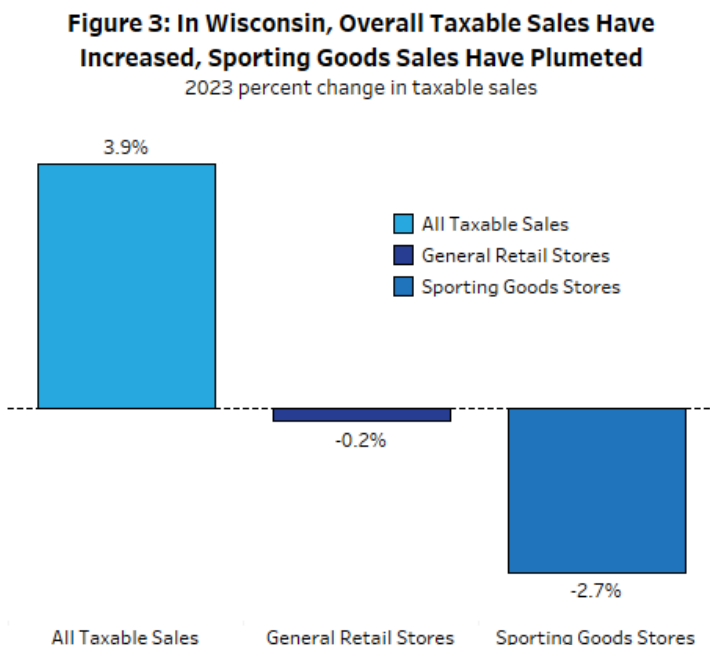
double the annual sales between 2007 and 2018. These nonresident sales are especially important to the state’s tourism economy, as they represent visitors who bring money from out of state, often to rural areas.

Another issue raised by the increasing use of these parks is the possibility of overcrowding. The DNR has reported visits have jumped by more than 21% from 2019, though estimated visits are a less precise measure than park sticker sales. Our [prior research](#) indicates that many of these visits are concentrated in a few parks, and that these premier properties can experience overcrowding, resulting in the need for more frequent maintenance.

### OUTDOOR EQUIPMENT SALES DIP

As state residents took up new outdoor activities early in the pandemic, sales by outdoor recreation retail stores in Wisconsin grew by 26% in 2020 and 24% in 2021, outpacing sales growth at general retail stores that sell a broad assortment of products. However, the past two years have seen business slow at these stores, with retail sales climbing by only 7% in 2022 and dropping 2.7% in 2023.

Figure 3 shows that growth in sales by sporting goods stores trails other taxable sales in the state, an indicator of trends in outdoor purchasing. However, it does not capture all sales of these goods, as equipment purchased at large general retailers would not be captured in that group. While the differences are stark,



Source: Wisconsin Department of Revenue

the decline is even more noteworthy in the face of strong economic growth and persistent inflation, which together drive up prices.

This trend fits with a massive increase in participation, followed by a plateau in which new recruits continued participating. New outdoor enthusiasts likely purchased gear early in the pandemic. Yet 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 dropped, resulting in less purchasing. Further, household essentials such as food and rent are likely a higher priority for consumers. As inflation rose, it’s likely that expensive purchases of outdoor gear were delayed or dropped.

Slipping gear sales are important to note as they can negatively impact the state’s economy, affecting retailers, and also some of the state’s major producers of outdoor recreation gear, like Trek Bicycles, St. Croix Fishing Rods, and Vortex Optics.

Some states use taxes on sales of this equipment to fund outdoor recreation opportunities. If Wisconsin leaders decided to move in that direction, it would be wise to consider the volatility of recreational equipment sales associated with the outdoors, as shown below. Tying funding to such a volatile source might lead to substantial year-to-year shifts in money available, with some years falling well short of expectations.

### FUNDING THE OUTDOORS

State park use is typically associated with activities such as hiking, bird watching, and other silent sports that don’t typically require additional licenses. There are some exceptions such as off-road cycling and cross-country skiing that do require a trail pass. But in general, the only pass required for these activities is the annual purchase of a state parks sticker.

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. This has made it more difficult to pay for existing priorities funded with declining hunting and fishing license sales.

## CONCLUSION

It appears that some of the increased outdoor recreation seen during the pandemic stuck around as life returned to normal. However, the long-term downward trajectory of participation in hunting and fishing has now returned while state park use has remained robust. This suggests that state leaders may wish to consider looking for expanded state park recreation opportunities to accommodate the growing number of visits.

The increases in hunting and fishing license purchases have provided a short-term bump in outdoor recreation and conservation funding, but the return of declining participation raises anew the question of how the state will pay for providing these priorities in the future. While increases in other recreational activities result in some revenue increases, they are insufficient to both replace funding used for habitat management and law enforcement, while providing for expanded opportunities at state parks.

Wisconsin's economy depends in part on [outdoor recreation](#), and as more people venture outdoors, that expands economic opportunities. As participation trends shift, state leaders may wish to consider ways to ensure stable sources of funding to continue the state's proud outdoor traditions. The pandemic-induced uptick helped buy some time to make these decisions, but data show future challenges are still likely.

Potential funding replacements could include options such as [taxes on outdoor equipment](#), [additional access fees for more users](#), increases to existing fees, [state tax credits](#) for land donations, or a [dedicating a portion of sales taxes](#), among other options outlined in our 2023 conservation funding report. Regardless of the choice, state leaders may wish to consider a new course forward before the need for additional sources of conservation funding becomes truly dire.

