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Outdoor Recreation Generates Big Money in Washington

OLYMPIA—People spend \$26.5 billion annually in Washington to enjoy their favorite outdoor activity, according to a report released today.

The report, [Economic Analysis of Outdoor Recreation in Washington State](#), found that residents and tourists spend \$18.8 billion annually on outdoor recreation trips, including trips to local, state and national parks. In addition, they spend \$7.7 billion annually on outdoor recreation gear, equipment and repair services.

As that spending reverberates through Washington's economy, outdoor recreation spending supports \$40.3 billion in total economic activity, supporting 264,000 jobs or 6 percent of all jobs in Washington. This places outdoor recreation on par with Washington's aerospace industry, which reported 237,000 direct and indirect jobs in 2017.

"This report shows the enormous value that outdoor recreation brings to Washington's economy," said Gov. Jay Inslee. "I hope that the people of our state continue to explore our state's parks, forests and waterways with appropriate precautions taken to ensure the health and safety of participants and those who work in outdoor recreation. This is an important aspect of our state's economy and will continue to be as we take steps to safely re-open."

The statistics are from 2019, before many recreation spots were temporarily closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Outdoor recreation is a bright spot today with many getting outside because alternative activities are closed,” said Kaleen Cottingham, director of the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office, one of three organizations that commissioned the report. “This study shows that the money people spend recreating benefits our local economies. Washington is known as a premiere destination for outdoor recreation. We should think strongly about continuing to invest in our outdoor assets—to maintain our trails, re-design overcrowded boat launches, repair deteriorated campgrounds and build new places to recreate—as a way to improve our economic future and enhance the beautiful places that we all enjoy.”

The report shows that 1 in 17 jobs in Washington are tied to outdoor recreation spending. Every \$1 million spent on outdoor recreation supports 10 jobs and generates \$1.52 in economic activity.

“The recreation sector has shown strong growth over the past half-decade,” said Marc Berejka, director of Community and Government Affairs at Recreational Equipment, Inc., one of the organizations that commissioned the report. “The report shows that spending on outdoor recreation grew from \$21.6 billion in 2014, to \$26.5 billion in 2019—an increase of 22 percent. Before COVID-19, we saw that type of growth across our co-op, whether it was a family coming in to buy gear for their first camping trip or the experienced mountain climber looking for specialized equipment. And even as we all work our way through the pandemic, it’s clear Washington is a state of people who love to spend time outside.”

Beyond economics, the report highlights the immense environmental benefits of outdoor recreation. Washington’s outdoor places also provide public benefits, known as ecosystem services, such as clean air and clean water, habitat for animals, scenic beauty, recreational enjoyment, water storage to minimize damage from floods, resiliency to climate change, food and medicine. The value of these services is pegged at between \$216 billion and \$264 billion annually.

“We know our lands, waters and recreation opportunities are the main reasons we love our state—and why so many people move and visit here each year. This report highlights just how valuable our outdoor places are to us and to those who plan to visit the state,” said Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz, who leads the Washington State Department of Natural Resources, one of the organizations that commissioned the report. “Outdoor recreation is a part of the heritage and culture of Washington, a value beyond what can be tallied on a spreadsheet, however this report illustrates how much people plan and prepare to make the most of the outdoors, particularly today with it being one piece of normalcy we all need to get us through this unprecedented time.”

“This is the second piece of good news we’ve heard,” Cottingham said. “This month, Congress approved the [Great American Outdoors Act](#), which provides permanent federal funding for parks, trails and wildlife habitat conservation. That’s a big win for outdoor recreation and us all.”

The report was written by Earth Economics of Tacoma.

Below are guidelines for safely recreating outdoors.

#RecreateResponsibly

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Check the status of the place you want to visit. If it is closed, don't go. If it's crowded, have a back up plan.

PRACTICE PHYSICAL DISTANCING

Keep your group size small. Be prepared to cover your nose and mouth and give others space. If you are sick, stay home.

PLAN AHEAD

Prepare for facilities to be closed, pack lunch, and bring essentials like hand sanitizer and a face covering.

PLAY IT SAFE

Slow down and choose lower-risk activities to reduce your risk of injury. Search and rescue operations and health care resources are both strained.

EXPLORE LOCALLY

Limit long-distance travel and make use of local parks, trails, and public spaces. Be mindful of your impact on the communities you visit.

LEAVE NO TRACE

Respect public lands and waters, as well as Native and local communities. Take all your garbage with you.

BUILD AN INCLUSIVE OUTDOORS

Be an active part of making the outdoors safe and welcoming for all identities and abilities.