



**Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing Testimony**

**Secretary Cindy Adams Dunn**

**Department of Conservation and Natural Resources**

**September 15, 2020**

Chairwoman Boscola and members of the Senate Democratic Policy Committee:

In my budget hearing testimony in March, I said that the outdoor recreation opportunities DCNR provides—state parks and forests, as well as local parks and trails funded by DCNR grants—are crucial to helping Pennsylvanians of all ages maintain their mental and physical health. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that to be even truer than I imagined.

In small towns and big cities, stores are sold out of bikes and kayaks. Trails are humming with activity. With their social lives upended, travel plans cancelled, and futures uncertain, millions Pennsylvanians have done the same thing: gone outside. From lunch breaks spent at local parks to multiday camping trips, outdoor recreation has provided people much-needed opportunities to get exercise, relieve stress, and be with loved ones while remaining safe and socially distanced.

State parks in particular have experienced unprecedented attendance levels. For example, there were over 7.27 million state park visits in July, an increase of 1.49 million (25.76%) compared to the previous July. Overall, parks have seen a 22.86% rise in attendance from last year, with 27.73 million total visits through July. Campgrounds have been fully booked weeks in advance, and some parks have been so popular that they reach capacity by 10 a.m. (DCNR has addressed overcrowding issues by adding staff where necessary and encouraging visitors to explore less-busy parks and forests). Anyone can visit a state park for free, and DCNR believes it should stay that way to ensure that every Pennsylvanian can enjoy the benefits of spending time in nature regardless of their financial situation.

It's not just state parks seeing huge attendance surges—trails have been more popular than ever. A study by the Pennsylvania Environmental Council found that statewide trail use increased by 52% in March compared to the previous year, with some trails experiencing 100–200% increases. “Every day is like a weekend day now,” said one trail manager. Many trail managers also reported seeing a much wider variety of trail users, as many people from all walks of life went hiking or biking on a trail for the first time.

Increased outdoor recreation is boosting Pennsylvania's economy, and will be crucial to the state's financial recovery. Annually, outdoor recreation in Pennsylvania generates \$29 billion in consumer spending and \$1.9 billion in tax revenue while directly supporting 251,000 jobs. A 2012 Penn State study found that the nearly 40 million annual state park visitors generate more than \$1 billion in economic activity each year, directly supporting 9,435 jobs and spending over \$628 million directly at local shops,

outfitters, restaurants, and other businesses that need support now more than ever. Overall, every \$1 invested in state parks returns \$12.41 of value-added income to the commonwealth.

Investments in our conservation and recreation resources are essential to meet the growing demand. DCNR faces a documented need of more than \$1 billion in state parks and forests to fix and maintain the roads, bridges, dams, sewer systems, and other crucial infrastructure that allows visitors to enjoy our parks and forests safely; more visitors will put an even greater strain on this infrastructure. And throughout the commonwealth, local governments and volunteer groups are working to create parks, playgrounds, green spaces, and trails that provide opportunities for escape close to home while lifting real estate values and attracting residents and businesses. These projects would be impossible without grants from dedicated funding sources like the Keystone Fund and Environmental Stewardship Fund, which in turn leverage significant local investments.

Investing in conservation and recreation projects injects millions of dollars into the economy, sustaining quality local jobs and keeping businesses that anchor communities—such as construction and engineering companies—afloat. It is crucial that DCNR is able to continue to fund these projects in order to help communities—and the state as a whole—recover from the devastating economic effects of the pandemic. Cuts or raids to dedicated funding sources will only make recovery more difficult.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its fallout have made it abundantly clear that outdoor recreation is vital to Pennsylvania's economy and the wellbeing of millions of its citizens. In the most difficult time of their lives, people have turned to parks, forests,

trails, and neighborhood green spaces. It has never been more important to invest in these resources and ensure they exist for future generations to turn to in their own times of need.

### Pennsylvania State Parks Attendance Numbers

\*data for August 2020 not yet available

Month	2019	2020	% Change
January	1,109,926	1,238,918	11.62%
February	1,157,802	1,304,511	12.67%
March	1,777,821	2,270,546	27.72%
April	2,881,691	3,242,678	12.53%
May	4,243,178	5,752,835	35.58%
June	5,615,064	6,644,590	18.34%
July	5,788,123	7,278,926	25.76%
<b>Total</b>	<b>22,573,605</b>	<b>27,733,004</b>	<b>22.86%</b>

