

# Tracking the Outdoor Recreation Community's Reaction to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to alter daily life and lead to changes in the way we spend time outside. In an effort to gather timely and relevant data on national recreation patterns, the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics and its academic partner, Pennsylvania State University, have been working to conduct a study that can offer guidance to land managers, recreation providers, and outdoor enthusiasts across the United States. Through three phases of survey-based data collection, a longitudinal perspective of how outdoor recreationists are reacting to the COVID-19 pandemic was developed. The timing of this research was purposeful, as it intended to capture self-reported information related to outdoor recreation and COVID-19 during three time periods immediately following the official designation of the pandemic. These findings track behaviors, determinants of decision-making, and future intentions across the study period.

**3 Phases**  
of Surveying - Beginning  
April 9th and Ending  
May 23rd.

**2,651**  
Completed Surveys

**1,012** Phase I

**823** Phase II

**816** Phase III



## Recreationists are beginning to get back to their **normal dosage of nature**.

Before the pandemic, respondents reported they participated in some kind of outdoor recreation about 5 days per week, on average. In Phase 1, that number had declined significantly\*. However, participation rebounded significantly\* in Phases 2 and 3.



## Recreationists are **beginning to travel away from their home turf**.

Before the pandemic, only 11% of respondents typically stayed within two miles from their home to participate in outdoor recreation. In Phase 1, immediately following the declaration of the pandemic, 50% of respondents were typically staying within two miles from home to recreate. As the pandemic has progressed and shelter-in-place orders decrease, respondents are travelling further once again. [Phase 2 = 42% typically staying within two miles of home to recreate, Phase 3 = 31%]



## Recreationists are **venturing back into the backcountry**.

Before the pandemic, respondents reported they travelled 4.8 miles into the backcountry during their average outdoor recreation experience. In Phase 1, backcountry travel declined significantly\*. However, backcountry travel increased significantly\* by Phase 3. Still, backcountry travel has yet to recover to pre-pandemic levels.



## Recreationists are **basing their behavior on personal health motivations and clear communication from trusted sources**.

Across all three phases of the study, respondents indicated their desire to gain health benefits and comply with orders and recommendations from authorities were most important when making outdoor recreation decisions.



## Recreationists are increasingly **more aware of long-term changes to their behavior**.

In Phase 1 of the study, 38% of respondents perceived that their long-term recreation behavior would change in response to their experience during the pandemic. By Phases 2 [49%] and 3 [52%], half of respondents perceived long-term changes. The most noted long-term changes were utilizing local public lands more often and increasing their array of recreational activities.



Learn more at [lnt.org/research-resources/leave-no-trace-covid-19-research/](https://lnt.org/research-resources/leave-no-trace-covid-19-research/)

See full results at <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/gnjcy>

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\*Statistically significant at a 95% confidence interval



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