



GATEWAY AND  
NATURAL AMENITY  
REGION INITIATIVE

# OUTDOOR RECREATION IN UTAH DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

August 19, 2020 Research Q&A Session

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# OVERVIEW

The spread of COVID-19 throughout Utah has dramatically altered how the state's residents, as well as visitors, participate in outdoor recreation. The rapid closures of the state's ski resorts cut many Utahns off from experiencing the state's iconic deep powder, shuttering many resorts, restaurants, and retail shops. The use of local parks and trails increased significantly across the Wasatch Front as large proportions of the population transitioned to working from home. Similarly, visitation to many state parks also increased as residents started to take advantage of outdoor recreation opportunities closer to home. The temporary closure of the state's five national parks caused many tourists to delay or change their travel plans.

This panel discussion provided insights into how outdoor recreation participation within Utah has changed throughout the pandemic. We brought together perspectives from a municipal trail system, Utah State Parks, and researchers looking at visitation patterns and behaviors in Arches National Park.

You can [view the full session](#) on the Institute of Outdoor Recreation & Tourism's YouTube Channel.



## ABOUT THE GNAR INITIATIVE

[The GNAR Initiative](#) leverages research, education, and capacity building to assist communities, land managers, and others in gateway and natural amenity regions throughout the West in preparing for and responding to planning, development, natural resource management, and public policy challenges, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. The Initiative is an affiliation of university faculty, government and state agencies, non-profit organizations, and community leaders. It is based in the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism at Utah State University.

**MODERATOR:** Jordan W. Smith, Ph.D.

Director, Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism  
Utah State University

## PANELISTS:

**Jim Price**

Senior Planner, Active Transportation  
Mountainland Association of Governments

**Jeremy Shaw**

Park Manager, Antelope Island State Park  
Utah Division of Parks and Recreation

**Wayne Freimund, Ph.D.**

Professor, Recreation Resource Management  
Utah State University - Moab

**Zach Miller, Ph.D.**

Assistant Professor, Recreation Resource  
Management  
Utah State University

# HOW HAS TRAIL USE CHANGED IN SUMMIT, UTAH, AND WASATCH COUNTIES?

The Mountainland Association of Governments (MAG) has been tracking trail usage across Utah, Wasatch and Eastern Summit County since 2011. The diagram below (*Figure 1*) compares average visitation for five Utah County trails in 2019 vs. 2020. As you can see, April 2020 trail visits are more than double those seen in April 2019 (160,000 versus 60,000). Visitation approached more normal levels in June, however MAG is still seeing a 30-40% increase in trail use compared to 2019.

There are five major issue areas for recreation managers:

- \* Parking
- \* Restrooms
- \* Maintenance
- \* Social Distancing
- \* Illegal Trail Building

MAG does not actively manage trails, but works in tandem with local trail and recreation planners. These local planners are finding that many people are just “discovering” the local trails they’ve always had access to, but had not visited previously. There have also been many days when trailheads with 30-car parking lots will have over 100 cars. Recreation departments and infrastructure were not set up to accommodate the increase in usage and have had to double their restroom and disposal services to compensate for the increased usage and trash.

While MAG isn’t expecting things to stay at this level, they do expect many people who have “discovered” these trails to continue to visit them at an increased rate into the future. For example, some local bike shops ran out of inventory for the year with new first-time bike purchases. Those who have bought that equipment will most likely continue to use it into the future. Municipalities and their local volunteer forces aren’t able to maintain these levels on their own and are looking at potentially hiring outside help to maintain trails into the future.

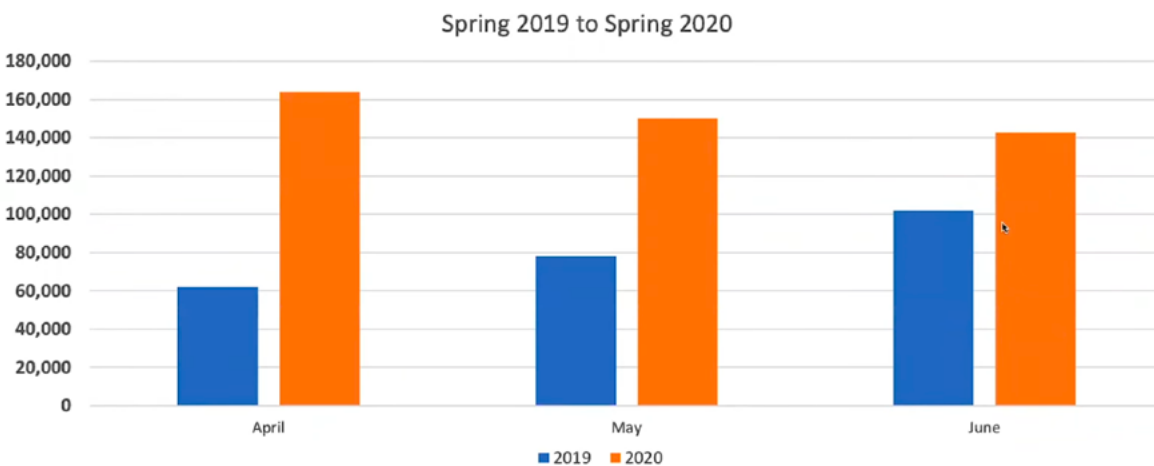


Figure 1 - Utah County Trail Visitor Averages

## HOW DID THE PHASED RE-OPENING OF UTAH'S STATE PARKS PLAY OUT?

There was a three-phase approach to Utah's State Parks reopening: The initial phase began with a directive issued by Governor Herbert restricting park visitation to those who lived in the same county as a park. During this phase, Antelope Island State Park had an over 3-hour line to get into the park. Because of the Governor's directive, park staff were able to turn some visitors away at the gate. While that did reduce visitation, it caused many issues with campers and visitors who had previously made reservations or plans to visit the park. Utah State Parks then moved to allow park visitation from residents of broader geographic regions of the state. Under both the county and regional restrictions, Utah State Parks also saw people "rediscover" their local parks. Many visitors were locals who had not visited before or hadn't visited in a long time.

Since fully reopening, Antelope Island State Park has seen the increase in local visitation combine with external visitation, causing visitation levels to be much higher than last year. Water-based parks (Deer Creek, Sand Hollow, etc) have been some of the hardest hit. They are now frequently closing during the week, where that used to be something that only happened during the weekends. Southern Utah's state parks also had a notable increase in visitation when the county restrictions were lifted, largely due to visitors from Nevada and Colorado where state restrictions were more severe than Utah's.

## DID STATE PARKS CHANGE PROCEDURES OR CLOSE FACILITIES TO TRY AND STEM THE SPREAD OF COVID-19?

State Parks are following the CDC recommendations for disinfecting frequently touches surfaces. For example, bathrooms are being cleaned 3-5 times a day where they used to only be cleaned once a day. These increased cleanings have led to some staff burnout, but parks are trying their best. Parks also have plexi-glass shields in visitor centers and have canceled programs that would draw more than 20-50 people.

Parks have also started limiting numbers at many parks. The state government asked parks to reduce capacity by a third, so now when parking lots are full many parks turn visitors away. Antelope Island has tried to do some ticket sales online to try and get people to plan ahead before coming out, and some campgrounds have turned into day-use only areas. Jordanelle Reservoir has implemented a texting program where you can sign up and get notified of what the park capacity is to know ahead of time whether you may be turned away. Finally, some parks are trying to accommodate locals by limiting price increases on day-use and overnight fees.

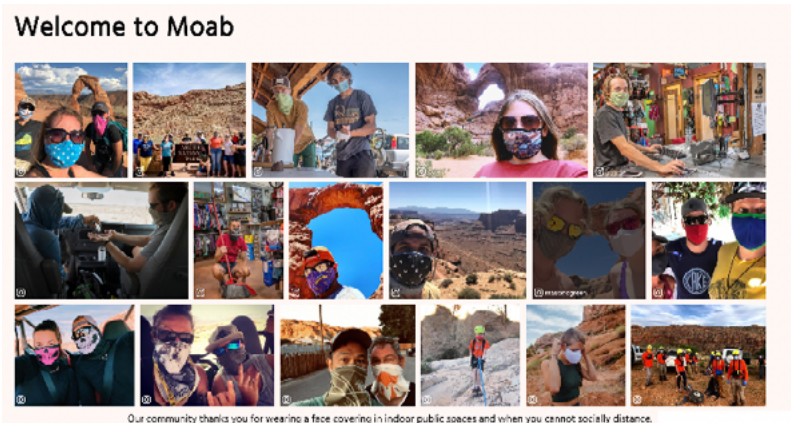


# HOW HAS GRAND COUNTY RESPONDED TO THE PANDEMIC, AND WHAT ARE SOME OF THE WAYS THEY HAVE TRIED TO PROTECT LOCALS?

If you go to the DiscoverMoab.com website you'll see that it is open for visitation, but you'll also see a second message:

"STAY SAFE TO STAY OPEN."

Grand County's economy and culture will be forced to close down again if they can't keep everything safe and open.



## COVID-19 statistics from Grand County:

- \* First case was March 27th
- \* Had 53 confirmed cases on August 18th
- \* Moab hospital has recorded 48 residents and 24 non-resident cases of COVID-19 -- Non-resident cases are not counted in the state tally and show that non-residents are bringing it to the community
- \* Primary age is 25-44 years of age -- younger than average
- \* One death
- \* Over half of all cases occurred between July 8-August 18

Looking at visitation to Arches (Figure 2), you can see how COVID-19 affected Moab's spring season. In January and February, visitation in 2020 was on track to be higher than 2019, however once the shutdowns started in March there was a serious decline. In April Arches NP was closed. While there isn't data for June or July yet, the loss of 400,000 visitors in the spring season was a substantial hit to the community. These numbers don't include the Jeep Safari or other events that would have happened over the spring season.

Month	2019	2020	Difference
January	21,499	28,462	6,963
February	30,239	42,416	12,177
March	132,191	81,623	-50,568
April	168,788	0	-168,788
May	217,474	13,882	-203,592
			-403,808

Figure 2 - Arches NP Spring Visitation Rate

## HOW HAS GRAND COUNTY RESPONDED TO THE PANDEMIC - CONTINUED

In May, Grand County moved to Yellow and started re-opening with restrictions (*see slides in Appendix A for more details*) and visitors started slowly coming back. However, when Arches re-opened on May 29 the park was full within 2-hours of opening and started turning people away.

### Additional Impacts of COVID-19 in Grand County:

- \* Economic Anguish (private, nonprofit and public) - laid off multiple city employees including a policeman
- \* Social concern
- \* Challenges for families (working at home, schools, etc.)
- \* Tension with the politics of it, but general tolerance and constructive community cooperation
- \* Early visitors did not wear masks, but that is improving
- \* Moab is now open again and the cases are rising at a much faster rate

## WHAT ARE SOME CHALLENGES NATIONAL PARK MANAGERS ARE FACING IN TRYING TO BALANCE VISITATION WITH INFRASTRUCTURE LIMITATIONS?

National Parks are set up to funnel people to certain parts of the park, which has caused some problems. Many parks have had to reduce staff as well in order to ensure they are able to provide employees with safe housing should they need to quarantine or isolate. There are no official numbers out for a lot of parks right now, but parks are still very busy.

While international visitation has taken a dip, there are still international visitors coming. In Arches, there are hundreds of people moving through popular trails every hour and the visitor center is still largely closed. Fiery Furnace is also still closed given the tight proximity of some of the slot canyons. Bathrooms have also been getting cleaned much more frequently, similar to other parks.



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# APPENDIX A - PRESENTATION SLIDES

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# GATEWAY AND NATURAL AMENITY REGION INITIATIVE

[gnar.usu.edu](http://gnar.usu.edu)

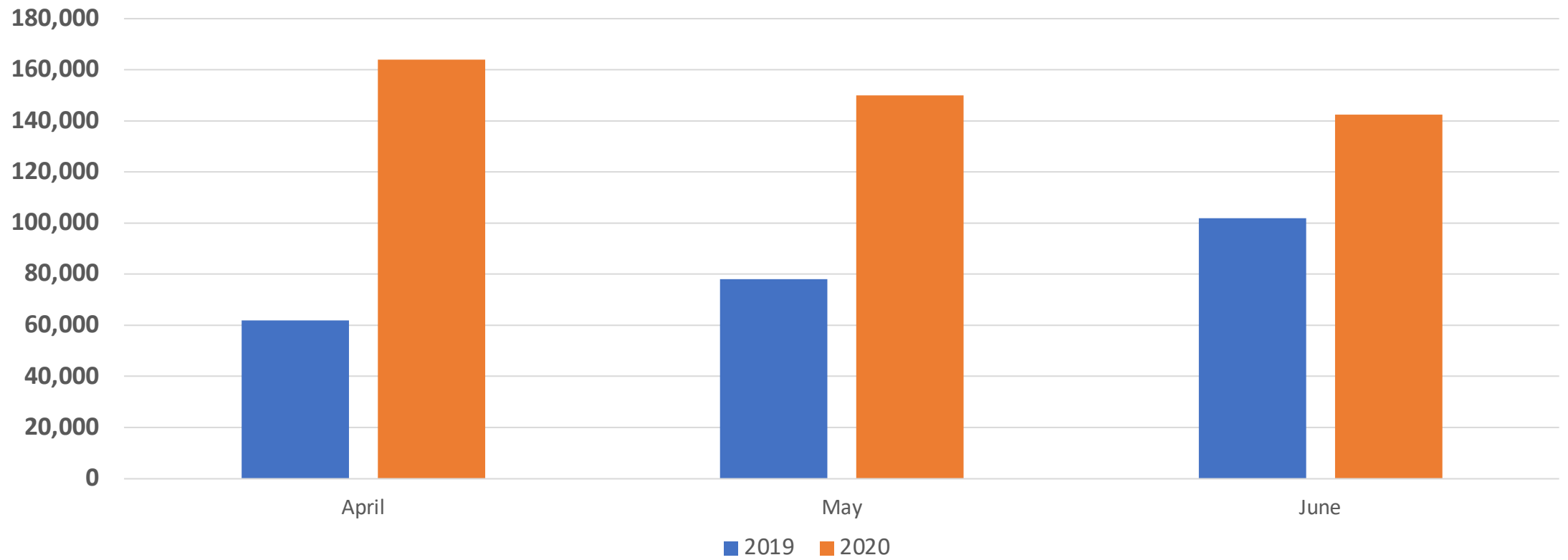
# Covid Impacts on Trail Use Utah and Wasatch Counties

Jim Price

Mountainland Association of Governments

# Utah County Urban Trail User Counts

Spring 2019 to Spring 2020



# OBSERVATIONS

## Major Issues

- Parking
- Restrooms
- Maintenance
- Social Distancing
- Illegal Trail Building

# OBSERVATIONS

## Emerging/Ongoing Considerations

- Temporary or Sustained Use Levels?
  - Discovery
  - Investments in Equipment
- Maintenance/Staffing Budgets
- Volunteers?
- E-Bikes
  - Inexperienced Users
  - Trail Design – Speeds, Sight Distance, Materials
  - Trail Damage?

# Welcome to Moab



Our community thanks you for wearing a face covering in indoor public spaces and when you cannot socially distance.

[Discovermoab.com/covid](https://discovermoab.com/covid)

**STAY SAFE**  
— TO STAY OPEN —

[STAYOPENUTAH.COM](https://stayopenutah.com)



# Moab and COVID

- Grand County
  - Our first case was March 27<sup>th</sup>.
  - We have had 53 confirmed cases in Grand county
  - The Moab hospital has registered 48 residents and 24 non-residents.
  - The dominant age band is 25-44 years of age.
  - We have one death.
  - About half of our cases have occurred in the past month.

The Loss of  
Spring  
Season  
Visitation  
ANP

Month	2019	2020	Difference
January	21,499	28,462	6,963
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# Key times

- April- Stay at home and commercial rental closures all of
  - Guidance for Easter was to go for a hike among other things
  - State parks remained open for day use to local residents
- May – Moved to Yellow
  - Lodging opened with restrictions
  - RV parks opened with restriction
  - Visitation mostly from Utah and Colorado
  - Town still felt like it was empty
  - National Parks open on May 29th
- June
  - Most restrictions removed
- July 7 – mask rule implemented



Absolutely  
No Entry

Regardless of  
Pass/Permit

Come  
Back  
in  
3 Hours

**PARK  
FULL**

**ROAD  
CLOSED**

May 29, 2020

# Some of the Impacts

- Economic anguish (private, nonprofit and public)
- Social concern
- Challenges for families (working at home, schools etc.)
- Tension with the politics of it, but general tolerance.
- Early visitors did not wear a lot of masks, but that is improving
- We are now busy again and our cases are rising at a much faster rate (doubled within the month). July 8th, 23 cases. August 10th - 52 cases.



Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism  
Department of Environment and Society  
Utah State University  
Logan, UT 84322-5215