

What Does Social Distancing Look Like In A Busy National Park?

Ellis Juhlin

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When the COVID-19 pandemic shut down businesses, schools and gathering places last year, many people turned to the outdoors for an escape. But the increase in visitors to places like national parks meant social distancing became a challenge in these places too.

In order to reduce the impact of visitors on national parks, park infrastructure, like roads and visitors centers, funnel visitors to certain areas. Which meant when park visitation increased during the pandemic, so did human traffic at these concentrated spots.

“We developed the components of the study to answer that question: can people still socially distance in a crowded national park?” said Dr. Zach Miller, who is a Utah State University professor with [the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism](#).

His colleague, Dr. Wayne Friemund, another professor with USU and the institute, lives in Moab and personally witnessed the growing crowds at his local national park, Arches. So he reached out to Miller and begin researching what was happening at the parks.

By putting up infrared scanners and trail cameras, they were able to record the number of people on trails and their behavior in the park. They found in 55% of groups, every member was masked while 33% of groups had no one wearing a mask.

“Those who weren't wearing masks, they weren't really behaving any differently than those who were wearing masks,” Miller said. “Which means they might be contributing to transmission if they are getting close to people. We found that most people, 68 plus percent of people, were able to navigate going through that foyer area without having a single interaction with anyone else.”

Miller doesn't think these crowds are going anywhere and is interested to see what sustained high levels of outdoor recreation looks like for Utah. He said levels of use aren't just increasing, they are happening in more places across the state.

“A lot of times our BLM lands are not set up to handle the same kind of capacity as our national parks,” Miller said. “You know, Arches sees millions of visitors a year and BLM lands don't. In recreation, we call that displacement. People are being displaced out of different areas. And so we're seeing that not only within parks, as campgrounds and stuff fill up, but also outside of parks. As people spill over to BLM or Forest Service, other kinds of state lands in those areas.”