



New York State Comptroller  
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Economic and Policy Insights

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# **The Economic Impact of the Great Outdoors**

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June is National Great Outdoors Month. As New Yorkers prepare for summer vacations and to celebrate the 4th of July weekend, many plan to go swimming, camping, hiking, hunting or fishing, visit amusement parks, attend outdoor festivals and concerts, or spend time gardening or stargazing. All types of outdoor recreation in New York provided \$21.1 billion in economic activity in 2020 and supported over 241,000 jobs with \$13.1 billion in compensation. While New York ranks fourth in the nation on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) generated by outdoor recreation, outdoor recreation represents a more significant part of the economy in nearly every other state. As outdoor activities continue to recover and evolve in the wake of the pandemic, policymakers can explore ways to enhance access to recreational opportunities, attract visitors, and preserve the environment on which it relies.

## Outdoor Recreation in New York

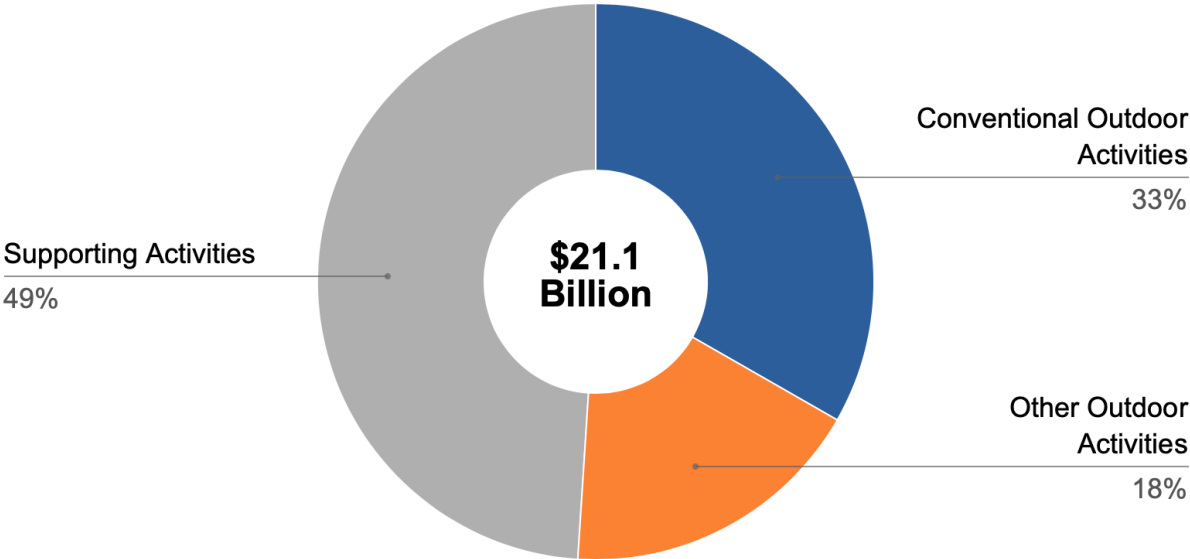
New York has a plethora of natural assets, ranging from Niagara Falls to the Adirondacks and Catskill mountains, from the Finger Lakes to the beaches and shores of Long Island. According to the State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, New York is home to 250 state parks and historic sites encompassing 350,000 acres and providing hiking trails, boat launches and campgrounds as well as beaches, pools and golf courses. There are also more than 6.7 million acres of public and private lands in the Adirondack Park and Catskill Park, and numerous federal recreational facilities across the State.

The economic impact from outdoor recreation reflects the purchase of direct goods and services associated with outdoor activities, including gear and equipment, fuel to operate recreational vehicles, maintenance and repair services, concessions, admission or tour fees, and lessons. It also includes goods and services that support access to outdoor recreation, such as transportation to the recreation activity, lodging and food services, as well as government spending on national and state parks (for example, spending for the maintenance of hiking or snowmobiling trails).<sup>1</sup>

In 2020, outdoor recreation activities provided nearly \$332 billion in economic activity nationwide, 1.8 percent of GDP. Outdoor recreation comprised the largest share of state GDP in Montana, 4.3 percent.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Connecticut and New York tied for last overall, with just 1.2 percent of State GDP generated by outdoor recreation. In years prior to the pandemic, outdoor recreation as a share of total state GDP was higher (on average, 1.5 percent), but New York ranked 49th, only higher than Connecticut.

By actual amount of GDP generated, New York ranked fourth, with outdoor recreation providing \$21.1 billion in economic activity in 2020 as well as supporting over 241,000 jobs with \$13.1 billion in compensation. The jobs span numerous industry sectors, but 38.7 percent are concentrated in arts, entertainment and recreation and accommodation and food services. The share of the economic impact produced from outdoor recreation activities is nearly equally divided between that from the activities themselves and from those that support them, as shown in Figure 1. Other activities, which include outdoor festivals and concerts, sporting events, amusement parks and golf courses, make up 18 percent. Conventional activities such as camping, hiking, hunting, fishing, boating, bicycling, and skiing as well as RVing, motorcycling, windsurfing and scuba diving comprise one-third of the total. Such activities play important roles in local economies in many rural parts of New York, as well as some communities on Long Island, as documented in a [previous report](#) by the Office of the State Comptroller.<sup>3</sup>

**FIGURE 1**  
**Outdoor Recreation in New York by Category, 2020**



Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

New York ranked in the top 10 for certain outdoor activities. For example, it ranked second for festivals, concerts and sporting events; third for camping and hiking; and fourth for boating/fishing and amusement parks. (See Figure 2.) In addition, New York ranked third for the production of multi-use accessories and apparel that can be used for outdoor recreation. Apparel and accessories is the single largest contributor to outdoor recreation GDP in New York.<sup>4</sup>

**FIGURE 2**  
**Top Outdoor Recreation Activities in New York, 2020**

	Economic Activity (Millions)	National Rank
Boating/Fishing	\$1,486.4	4
Festivals/Concerts/Sporting Events	\$955.1	2
RVing	\$559.3	8
Camping/Hiking	\$206.7	3
Amusement Parks	\$202.4	4
Snow Activities	\$135.5	9

Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

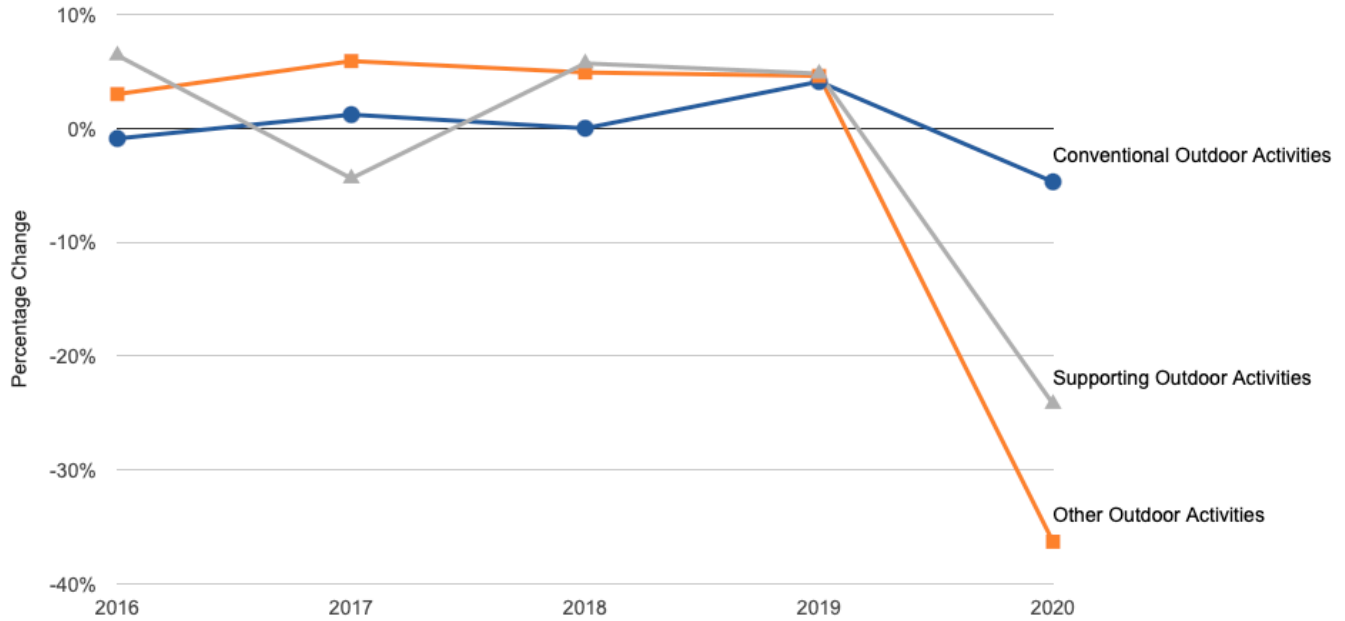
## Impact of the Pandemic

Like other sectors of the economy, outdoor recreation was adversely impacted by the pandemic, with economic activity declining by 21.5 percent in 2020. As shown in Figure 3, other outdoor activities, which typically involve large groups of people, was impacted the most, declining 36 percent. Festivals, sporting events and concerts, which comprise the highest share of this category, declined over 53 percent.

Similarly, with the leisure and hospitality industry suffering some of the greatest losses from the pandemic and those services, as well as transportation services, comprising almost two-thirds of the associated GDP in New York, the supporting activities category realized a 24 percent decline in 2020.

For the conventional outdoor activity category, the impact from the pandemic was much smaller, 4.7 percent lower than in 2019. In fact, some of the activities in this category realized gains, primarily those geared more towards individuals than large groups, most notably boating and fishing which grew by nearly 31 percent. Other activities with growth were other water activities (such as scuba, snorkeling, paddle boarding, and surfing), cycling (both bicycles and motorcycles), RVing, and camping and hiking. Snow activities (skiing, snowboarding, snowmobiling, and sleighing) experienced a decline.

**FIGURE 3**  
**Change in Economic Activity by Category, 2016 – 2020**



Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

## Conclusion

With its diverse geographic landscape as well as stadiums, amphitheaters, and sporting venues, New York is an attractive location for a wide variety of outdoor recreation activities. While a small part of the State economy, outdoor recreation supports numerous jobs and the compensation that goes with them. Efforts to bolster tourism and protect the outdoors are important for spurring greater economic activity and enhancing access to and utilization of these amenities.

Prior to the pandemic, New York had over 264 million visitors spending nearly \$74 billion.<sup>5</sup> While the pandemic caused both visitors and tourism dollars to decrease, it also resulted in a shift to conventional outdoor recreation; these activities were both less limited during the pandemic and were perceived as safer than indoor activities and gatherings. Empire State Development reported that the wealth of New York’s outdoor recreational activities is one reason why survey respondents continued to view the State as a vacation destination in SFY 2020-21. As the economy opened back up and travel restrictions were lifted in 2021, New York’s real GDP from the industries associated with tourism (arts, entertainment, and recreation as well as accommodation and food services) increased by over 18 percent but were just over two-thirds of 2019 levels. Efforts to attract visitors by emphasizing the State’s varied options for outdoor recreational activities should be enhanced.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Tina Highfill, Connor Franks, Patrick S. Georgi, and Thomas F. Howells III, "Introducing the Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account," *U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis*, March 2018, at <https://apps.bea.gov/scb/2018/03-march/0318-protytype-statistics-for-the-outdoor-recreation-satellite-account.htm>.
- 2 Data for this report is drawn primarily from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2020, at <https://www.bea.gov/news/2021/outdoor-recreation-satellite-account-us-and-states-2020>.
- 3 For example, hunting and fishing activities are a small portion, 5.6 percent, of total conventional outdoor activities, but are an important part of many upstate communities. According to the NY Department of Economic Conservation, there were over 2.6 million hunting and fishing licenses sold in New York in the 2015-16 license year, the most recent year for which there is county-level data. Nine of the top ten counties for license issuances were upstate, Erie County selling the most. However, in rural counties, such as Hamilton, Seneca, and St. Lawrence, the high number of hunting and fishing licenses as a proportion of the overall population indicates the prevalence of those activities within those counties.
- 4 Accessories and apparel include those items that are not associated with a specific outdoor activity. These include bug spray, coolers, general outdoor clothing (such as sweatshirts or jackets), backpacks, sunscreen, etc.
- 5 Empire State Development Corporation, Tourism and Business Marketing Report FY 2020/21, January 2022, at <https://esd.ny.gov/esd-media-center/reports/tourism-and-business-marketing-report-fy-20202021>.

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