

U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation's Tourism, Trade, and Export Promotion Subcommittee

Hearing: The State of Outdoor Tourism, Recreation, and Ecotourism – June 15, 2021, 3:00 pm.

Written Testimony of Zachary Hartman, Chief Policy Officer of Ducks Unlimited

Madame Chair, Ranking member Scott, and members of the committee – thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the state of the outdoor recreation economy. It is an honor to represent Ducks Unlimited and our one million supporters across the United States, as well as all of our nation's waterfowlers, our outdoor industry and conservation partners, and the millions of Americans who enjoy our great outdoors every day.

Ducks Unlimited is the world's leader in wetlands conservation, and proud to call Memphis, TN home for our National Headquarters. As Chief Policy Officer of Ducks Unlimited, I have the privilege of working with a team of dedicated professionals and volunteers in Washington, DC, and in State Capitals across the United States. We work hand-in-hand with private landowners, conservation partners, farmers and ranchers, tribes and government agencies to conserve wetlands sufficient to fill the sky with waterfowl today, tomorrow, and forever.

Most relevant today, Ducks Unlimited's work, and the access to outdoor recreation opportunities it provides, is an indispensable driver of economic activity, particularly in rural communities. Ducks Unlimited's work doesn't just benefit the outdoor recreation economy and waterfowl and wildlife. All Americans also enjoy the Ecosystem Services that wetlands provide in the form of carbon sequestration, clean water, groundwater recharge, flood attenuation, and coastal resiliency.

Everyone who works at Ducks Unlimited, and in our outdoor recreation industry, has a deep and personal connection to the outdoors, and I am no different. As a native son of Florida, my love for the outdoors began on the waters of Sarasota Bay, where my father now works as a light-tackle fishing guide. Whether fishing the turtle grass flats of the middle grounds for trout or pompano, or the backwater mangroves near Jackrabbit Island for snook and redfish, those experiences instilled in me a great appreciation of our responsibility to that resource, and the many ways it makes Sarasota one of the greatest vacation destinations in the country. If you're interested, we have the best beaches too.

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken its toll on the American economy, including nonprofits like Ducks Unlimited, but especially on the tourism industry. As the husband of a travel industry employee, I have watched first-hand as hotels have worked to navigate through these difficult times with the hope to rebuild soon. I also think about the many small business owners of hotels, restaurants, and retail establishments in cities and towns across the US who have had to close their doors to prevent the spread of COVID-19, only to watch the businesses they have built over a lifetime waste away over a period of months.

While the pandemic has hit American businesses hard, it has also helped us reconnect with the outdoors and our hunting heritage. A recent study from the Council to Advance Hunting and Shooting Sports found that hunting license sales increased in all regions of the US during 2020. Of the 40 states included in the study, 35 experienced an increase in 2020 compared to 2019. Overall, resident license sales were up 5.4 percent on average, and non-resident license sales increased by 1.6 percent. Bottom line, Americans were traveling to hunt, even in a pandemic.¹

There is no doubt that, when permitted, these hunters were visiting local outfitters to gear-up and seek the local knowledge, and they stopped by the diners to have lunch and swap stories about their experiences along the way. These hunters were also staying in the local motels, and others along their journey, as they

¹ Council to Advance Hunting and Shooting Sports, *COVID-19 and Hunting License Sales*. (April 2, 2021) <https://cahss.org/covid-19-and-hunting/>

struck out on the road for their next great adventure, leaving a small trail of economic stimulus. Add all those trails up, and it starts to make a difference.

Recent US National Park Service data confirms the direct economic impact of outdoor recreation travel on the service industry. According to the report, outdoor recreators spent \$14.5 billion in communities within 60 miles of a national park. Lodging was most greatly impacted with \$5 billion in economic output, and the restaurant sector was second with \$3 billion. In Nevada and Florida, park visitors spent \$278.6 million and \$521.1 million as a direct result of their outdoor recreation activities, respectively.²

I'll always remember something my father would tell me about the importance of our seasonal visitors. He'd say, "Zach – there's something important that you have to understand. All these people come here, they stay for a little while, and then they leave. But all their money stays right here in Sarasota. Be grateful." We took care of that resource, and it took care of us in so many ways.

Looking back, it makes a lot of sense. When many Americans think of travel destinations, they probably think of Carson City, Lake Tahoe, Las Vegas, or maybe Orlando, Key West, and St. Augustine. When I think of my favorite destinations, I think of backwoods fish camps on Lake Istokpoga, boating on Crystal River and the beautiful Central Florida springs. And I think of all the great local outfitters, diners, and hotels that we visited along the way.

There should be no doubt that outdoor recreation, especially waterfowling, is an essential part of the US economy and will continue to play a critical role in our recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, outdoor recreation accounts for 2.1 percent of US Gross Domestic Product (GDP) valued at approximately \$460 billion, and generates 5.2 million high-paying jobs³. The economic impact of hunting alone is more than \$110 billion.⁴ In Nevada, outdoor recreation provides \$5.5 billion in value added economic activity, representing 3.1 percent of state GDP and 59,499 jobs⁵. In Florida, outdoor recreation accounts for \$49.1 billion, 4.4 percent of state GDP, and 511,100 jobs⁶.

Waterfowlers have billions of reasons to be proud of how our tradition drives economic activity and supports our rural communities. According to recent data from a study published by the National Shooting Sports Foundation, waterfowling contributed \$4 billion to US GDP and supported 56,900 jobs, paying a total of \$2.4 billion in wages. Waterfowlers also paid more than \$509 million in federal taxes and \$399 million in state taxes.⁷ According to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, \$663 million is attributed to "Trip Expenditures" benefiting the travel and service industries.⁸ Recent National Park Service data confirms the direct economic impact of outdoor recreation travel.

What many Americans may not realize is the link between hunting and fishing, the conservation investments that sportsmen and women enable, and Americans' expansive access to public lands. Much of the outdoor recreation that Americans enjoy is made possible by voluntary user fees and taxes, paid for, and supported by, hunters and anglers. These programs include the Federal Duck Stamp, taxes on firearms, ammunition, and other hunting, fishing and boating equipment, as well as state excise taxes and

² National Park Service, *National Park Visitor Spending Contributed \$28.6 Billion to U.S. Economy in 2020*, (June 10, 2021) <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1207/vse2020.htm>

³ Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2019*, (Nov. 10, 2020) https://www.bea.gov/sites/default/files/2020-11/orsa1120_1.pdf

⁴ Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, *Outdoor Recreation Drives The American Economy, Industry Statistics*, (June 10, 2021) <https://recreationroundtable.org/impact-2/>

⁵ Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, 2019 – Nevada*, (Nov. 10, 2020) <https://apps.bea.gov/data/special-topics/orsa/summary-sheets/ORSA%20-%20Nevada.pdf>

⁶ Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, 2019 – Florida*, (Nov. 10, 2020) <https://apps.bea.gov/data/special-topics/orsa/summary-sheets/ORSA%20-%20Florida.pdf>

⁷ Southwick Associates. *Hunting in America: An Economic Force*. 2018 edition

⁸ US Fish and Wildlife Service, *Economic Impact of Waterfowl Hunting in the United States*, (March 2015) https://outdoorrecreation.wi.gov/Documents/Research%20Library%20Page%20files/US%20-%20Economic%20Impacts/Economic%20Impact%20of%20Waterfowl%20Hunting_2011.pdf

hunting and fishing license revenues. Ducks Unlimited has completed projects in approximately 1,700 public lands areas to provide or enhance the American public's access to hunting and other outdoor recreation opportunities.

Under the North American Model of Conservation, America's wildlife resources are shared with all people and are considered an international resource. Conservation programs take federal dollars and match them with state and private dollars from organizations like Ducks Unlimited, to provide habitat for wildlife and access for all to enjoy. According to the US Department of Interior, as of March, 2020, the US Fish and Wildlife Service had distributed more than \$22.9 billion for state conservation and recreation projects, which was then matched with an additional \$7.6 billion.⁹ Today, hunters and shooters generate more than \$1.8 billion each year for wildlife conservation.¹⁰

Congress has recently taken major steps to further support the conservation, enhancement, and expansion of Americans' public spaces. The passage of the "Great American Outdoors Act" and the "American Conservation Enhancement Act" during the 116th Congress, represent a significant commitment to key conservation programs with the reauthorization of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA), respectively. These voluntary and incentive-based programs conserve and enhance our nation's most important habitats and landscapes, and expand public access for all Americans to enjoy the outdoors. But there is more to be done.

Streamlining program delivery and growing investments in conservation and other natural infrastructure solutions that expand the American public's access and opportunities for outdoor recreation, especially hunting and fishing, is a commonsense way to get more value out of taxpayer dollars. These investments encourage healthy, active lifestyles and provide economic stimulus to nearby businesses, many of them small businesses.

Of particular interest to this committee should be the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's "Large Scale Habitat Restoration to Build Climate Resilience Grant Program." This program will enable large-scale habitat restoration across coastal systems and provide more outdoor recreation opportunities, as well as coastal resiliency to mitigate the impact of storm damage from hurricanes and flooding. A recent report published by Lloyds Tercentenary Research Foundation found that coastal wetlands prevented more than \$625 million in property damage during Hurricane Sandy, reducing property damage in the Northeast by an average of 10%.¹¹ Requested for \$40 million in the President's FY22 budget proposal, this is a logical investment that would provide a myriad of benefits to all Americans.

The Biden Administration's *America the Beautiful Initiative* calls on a whole-of-government approach to mitigate and address the challenges of our changing climate. Congress and the Administration should consider the following steps to support the outdoor recreation economy as they pursue that goal:

- Prioritize Natural Infrastructure Solutions.
- Pass the Recovering America's Wildlife Act.
- Eliminate regulatory "green tape" that hinders the delivery of scientifically beneficial conservation programs.
- Enhance voluntary and incentive-based conservation programs for working lands to support farmers and ranchers.
- Expand programs to meet the local needs of conservation on tribal lands and in areas that are accessible to socio-economically disadvantaged communities.

America's natural resources and public spaces are the envy of the world. This has been made possible by hunters and anglers, and organizations like Ducks Unlimited, Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, and others, who, for nearly 100 years, have invested their time and treasure into the wellbeing of our wildlife

⁹ US Department of Interior, *Sportsmen and Sportswomen Generate Nearly \$1 Billion in Conservation Funding*, (March 19, 2020) <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/sportsmen-and-sportswomen-generate-nearly-1-billion-conservation-funding>

¹⁰ Southwick Associates. *Hunting in America: An Economic Force*. 2018 edition

¹¹ Coastal Resilience, *Coastal Wetlands and Flood Damage Reduction*, (October 2016)

<https://coastalresilience.org/coastal-wetlands-provide-significant-flood-damage-reduction/>

and its habitat. For many reasons, the COVID-19 pandemic has inspired Americans to reconnect with the outdoors. Congress can build on the strong foundation of conservation programs, and the public-private conservation delivery model, to secure a durable legacy for future generations of Americans to enjoy.

Expanding public access opportunities for outdoor recreation, particularly hunting and fishing, with innovative utilization of new and existing programs will not only result in more waterfowl and wildlife and stimulate greater economic activity in our tourism industry. These efforts will also make our air and water cleaner, recharge precious groundwater systems, and fortify our communities against the threats of extreme weather. These are things that all Americans need and support.