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State parks see record visitation numbers throughout pandemic

By Daisy Nelson
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Despite the pandemic, state parks in Arizona have experienced record visitation numbers. Lake Havasu State Park and C have seen those visitor surges in the past several months.

Michael Zogg/Today's News-Herald

Although travel to Arizona is being hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic, the state's parks are enjoying record visitation numbers – especially those that bring visitors to the water.

The state's latest tourism data was presented during the Arizona Governor's Conference on

Tourism, held virtually on Zoom Wednesday. Colleen Floyd, Arizona Office of Tourism's director of research, noted that while the pandemic has obviously landed quite the hit to the industry, it's not all bad.

"Pandemic or no, May was a record-breaking month for state park visitation, and this pattern is even more prominent when you look at state parks with a waterway or lake," Floyd said. Lake Havasu and Cattail Cove State Parks are just two of multiple state parks in the region that line the Colorado River, prompting visitor surges for several weeks.

"Those parks are about to hit their peak season, so it's important to pay attention to overcrowding and that we're taking very good care of these spaces that have become even more popular," Floyd added.

Floyd also reported that Mohave, La Paz and Yuma County are at top performance in comparison to the rest of the state when it comes to demand for hotel rooms. While all three saw a drop in demand during March and April, La Paz County's demand in May and June was actually higher than it was in 2019. Mohave County also boasted higher demand in January and February in comparison to 2019 data, and June's demand isn't far behind what it was one year ago.

That's impressive, considering Arizona saw record-breaking visitation in 2019. Floyd reported the state "welcomed 46.8 million overnight visitors" last year, 40.6 million of which were domestic travelers.

Visitors also spent \$25.6 billion in the state last year, up a "very strong" 4.7 percent from 2018. That spending supported 194,000 jobs, which then earned \$7.7 billion.

While the state's tourism success in 2019 further highlights the dramatic drop in numbers due to shutdowns this year, Floyd said it's a good sign – meaning more and more people are valuing travel.

Usually, the AOT focuses on promoting Arizona outside of the state, due to the fact that three-quarters of visitors are non-residents. But during a pandemic that limits travel and causes closures, it's the perfect time to refocus Arizonans on exploring their own backyard, Floyd said.

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