

# BUILT-IN SOCIAL DISTANCING

**It is interesting to consider what long-term changes to America might result from our collective experience in dealing with the coronavirus.**

I've read, for example, that many companies have found that office employees are as, if not more, productive when working from home. One executive, whose company is headquartered in a major urban center, noted that he anticipated that at least 50 percent of his staff would continue to work at home on a permanent basis. Many of his employees, he noted, preferred that option and especially looked forward to no longer having to commute on crowded public transportation or deal with the daily grind of bumper-to-bumper traffic.

If you can now work from home, where might home be? You likely have come across recent news pieces headlined, "the flight to the suburbs." From New York to San Francisco, there is almost a stampede of inner-city apartment dwellers who are now clamoring for a house in the suburbs. Realtors note that many of these new would-be suburbanites are families with younger children and that a nice backyard is now a property's key selling point.

With this new desire for "outdoor space," I also found it interesting to see the extent to which fishing license and hunting (turkey/combo) license sales rose this past spring. Vermont saw a more than 50 percent increase in resident fishing and a 26 percent boost in turkey hunting licenses year-over-year. Iowa resident fishing licenses were up 53 percent this spring and turkey permits jumped up 36 percent. Back on the East Coast, fishing license sales in New York climbed by 30 percent and turkey permits shot up by 58 percent. Similar significant increases have occurred in other states around the nation, and a recurring theme from state wildlife agency personnel is that they're seeing lots more moms, dads and kids enjoying time outdoors together.

Sure, it's true that hunting and fishing naturally "fit the bill" with built-in social distancing as do a limited number of other outdoor pastimes. That alone may account for some of the current interest in these activities. These steep increases, however, suggest to me there is something more to it than that. Instead, it would appear that there has been a strong pent up demand for folks to get out on the water or in the

field and that the Covid-19 crisis, in a sense, finally broke that logjam.

With a forced slowdown and with so many more folks working from home, it seems that we now finally have the opportunity to get out and enjoy what we've been longing to do. Vermont Department of Fish & Wildlife Commissioner summed it up by stating, "Hunting and fishing are among those things that people love to do but didn't have time. Now, they do." Echoing that theme, Wisconsin DNR Secretary Preston Cole remarked, "The Covid-19 crisis has rekindled our appreciation for the outdoors, taking walks, bird watching, hunting and fishing."

One of the most impactful demographic trends in America has been the more than century-long migration of people from rural areas to big cities. Today, more than 80 percent of all Americans live in metropolitan districts of more than a million people.

With more and more folks no longer "tethered" to working from an office or in-town location, it will be interesting to see if this urban migration may slow down. Indeed, if you no longer have to commute, why limit yourself to expensive suburban areas when smaller



**Doug Painter**  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

towns and more rural areas offer much lower housing costs, slower-paced living and, notably, are much closer to quality hunting and fishing opportunities?

I recognize that working from home has become increasingly popular in recent years. Our experience with Covid-19 essentially amplified and accelerated what was already "trending."

In recent decades, however, participation in hunting and fishing has, broadly, been static to somewhat declining. Given some extra time, especially in a family context, we've seen a dramatic rise in participation in the spring of 2020. It seems that our previously more busy and hectic lifestyles were more the barrier to hunting and fishing than their innate appeal.

In the next few years, we'll see if this jump in hunting and fishing activity was something "of the moment," or, a trend "of the future." Ensuring the latter is a challenge we should all embrace.

Hope to see you down the trail. ■

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Doug Painter".

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