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Covid campers boost state park visits to record numbers in 2020

(Anchorage, AK) – Alaskans visited their state parks in record numbers in 2020, turning to affordable outdoor camping for relief from the contagion fears, social distancing restrictions and economic impacts related to the COVID-19 pandemic, a park official said today.

“Alaska State Parks have always offered residents and visitors a safe, economical way to enjoy our state’s natural beauty and recreational opportunities,” said Ricky Gease, director of the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation. “During the pandemic, people have rediscovered the benefits of getting outside into the fresh air, and we’ve received new data documenting that in a big way.”

The division recently renewed its contract with Aspira, a global online reservations service. In addition to a new reservation portal (<https://alaskastateparks.reserveamerica.com/>), the company provides the division data and analytics helping identify trends in visitation, usage and revenue. Aspira began collecting data in 2017 on all reservable campsite and public-use cabins through its Reserve America system.

Recent reports show occupancy at all the division’s campgrounds rose from 15,155 nights booked in 2019 to 17,236 in 2020. (Total available bookings vary slightly with campsite closures or removal from the reservation system.) Increases in occupancy rates (based on bookings on available nights) are reflected in public use cabin bookings at the division’s top regional campgrounds from 2019 to 2020:

- K’esugi Ken Campground (Interior): from 22.1 percent to 71.2 percent
- Nancy Lakes State Recreation Area (Mat-Su): from 30.6 percent to 38.2 percent
- Chugach State Park (Anchorage): from 47.8 percent to 60.4 percent
- Eagle Beach State Recreation Area (Juneau): from 43.5 percent to 52.9 percent
- Chena River State Recreation Area (Fairbanks): from 27.3 percent to 38.3 percent

The reports also show revenue at all campgrounds increased at a quickening pace, in some case doubling year-on-year. From 2019 to 2020, total campground revenue rose 33 percent (\$830,088 to \$1.23 million), compared to 15 percent from 2018-19 (\$705,451 to \$830,088) and 25 percent from 2017-18 (\$529,864 to \$708,451).

While welcome, the increased revenue does not generate any surplus for the division, Gease said. Increased visitor utilization has increased maintenance and operations costs, while administration costs have held steady or increased in recent years, parks have continuing maintenance needs, and the pandemic continues to create challenges in securing the summer staff and camp hosts that help keep state parks operating.

“We are proud to see that the numbers indicate state parks necessity as an increasingly popular destination for Alaskans and others, and we will continue to work hard to make best use of our revenue and resources to provide the highest quality experience for an increasing number of visitors,” Gease said.

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