

Thank You for Fishing in 2020

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Our agency and the Pennsylvania Game Commission are proud members of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA). AFWA represents state fish and wildlife agencies in Washington, D.C., to advance sound, science-based management and conservation of fish and wildlife and their habitats in the public interest. They provide members like us with coordination services on interdisciplinary and species-based programs that range from fisheries policy and fish habitat to wildlife action plans to the human dimensions of fish and wildlife conservation.

Each fall, AFWA's annual meeting offers state agencies the opportunity to share experiences, ideas, successes, and challenges and the chance to hear from government, non-profit, and industry partners about the latest trends and findings related to natural resource management and participation in outdoor recreation.

Like other similar events, the 2020 annual meeting was held virtually rather than in person. One of the highlights of the event was a presentation by staff from Brandt Information Services that described trends among the wave of people who headed outdoors during 2020 while COVID-19 raged across the country and impacted life for everyone.

In Pennsylvania, anglers flocked to the water in numbers we have not seen in 25 years. In fact, the nearly 980,000 licensed anglers in 2020 surpassed every other licensing year since 1996. While states across the country saw an increase in license sales, the 20% jump in the Commonwealth eclipsed the national average. Over one-fourth of the people who purchased a Pennsylvania fishing license in 2020 did so for the first time.

Brandt Information Services surveyed customers nationwide who purchased their first fishing or hunting license in 2020 or who returned to the sports last year after letting their license lapse. They asked who those people were, what motivated them to fish or hunt, and what types of information would be helpful to getting outdoors more often and having a better time when they do so.

Three interesting groups of participants stood out in the findings. New Gatekeepers were new customers who were more likely to be female and non-white than those who purchased a license pre-COVID. Group Adventurers included families, students, and others who were looking to experience the outdoors together with others. Ethical Tourists comprised a category of outdoor enthusiasts with a strong conservation ethic.



photos: PFBC archives

When asked about why they took to the waters and woods during 2020, the number one reason was (not surprisingly given the year we all had) stress relief, followed closely by a desire to get outdoors and to spend time with family.

The number one piece of information cited as being helpful to improve the outdoor experience was where to go. The Fish Boat PA mobile app is the perfect tool to meet that need, so please be sure to use it and recommend it to everyone you know who takes to the water in 2021.

What stands out about these responses is that the people who discovered or rediscovered the joys of fishing in 2020 were seeking an experience just as much as they were hoping to catch a fish. Hearing these results, the first thing that came to mind was the evening I spent with my twin sons wading in the Yellow Breeches Creek the day after trout season opened last spring.

I took them to a stretch of the creek I had not fished since I was their age. We had boated there together, but they had never experienced it with a rod in their hand and the anticipation of a trout at the end of the line.

We bushwhacked through the brush, scaled down and along the streambank, and smiled and laughed as we each caught fish as the cool limestone water started to make us shiver in our waders after a few hours in the water. The thing I remember most is walking down the path back to our car as daylight faded. To use that newly coined term, we were Group Adventurers who were happy to be together as a family. The world seemed to be falling apart, but for a moment now etched in time, we were enjoying a gorgeous Pennsylvania April evening not worrying about what was happening away from the creek.

Interestingly, Brandt Information Services found that putting food on the table ranked low on the list of reasons to fish or hunt among the new participants. But doing so certainly added to the fun for us that evening. The boys and I each kept one trout for dinner and fried them up in a cast iron skillet for the most memorable meal of the year.

No one knows what 2021 will bring, but one thing is certain—Pennsylvania's streams, rivers, and lakes will be waiting for everyone to find solace with a fishing rod in hand, connect with nature, and have fun making memories.