

Law makes people threaten to stop visiting State Parks.

Imagine going to a state park to simply walk your dog on a beautiful Fall or Spring day. Let's call her Daizi. You are keeping her on a leash, but a squirrel unexpectedly runs across your path. Daizi loves chasing squirrels and even though she has never caught one she is off before you can catch the leash. After being frustrated that Daizi got away you begin to call her back to you, but she is exploring something else off the trail in the woods. As you follow her into the woods you suddenly hear a high pitched bark and suspect the squirrel or some other animal must have surprised Daizi. As the yipping becomes more pronounced and more urgent you become worried. You catch up to where Daizi is and you find her bleeding and caught in what appears to be a trap. Fortunately for Daizi, no life threatening injuries were caused, but stitches and a broken bone are horrible enough. Through all of this you have no idea how this could have happened. You come to find that Act 168, which went into effect January 1, 2013, is what has caused this.

Important, but boring: On October 6th 2011 a bill was introduced in the assembly called AB311 that would become Act 168. In that bill there was a lot of feel good things to promote hunting in Wisconsin. After a public hearing on October 11th there were 7 amendments supported for the bill. Amendment 4, introduced by Republican Jeffrey Mursau of Crivitz Wisconsin, did two things. My guess is very few people realized the implications of these changes except for a rare few that wanted to pay back their hunting/fishing/trapping (HFT) constituents. Representative Mursau added fishing and trapping to the proposal's text and removed the restriction on HFT in State Parks. On November 1st the bill was passed 84 to 12 in the Assembly. Amendment 4 remained in the bill as it moved through the Senate. I heard a comment that it was too politically risky to remove Amendment 4. On March 7th of 2012 the bill passed the Senate 32 to 1. Only Senator Risser voted against it. The bill became law on April 3rd, 2012 and will go into effect January 1, 2013.

As a progressive, liberal I tend to believe that good things happen to people that don't cause trouble and do good themselves. I don't think that others want to purposefully harm me. But what has happened here is either a quagmire of unintended consequences or an implicit disdain for my rights. In any case it is imperative that the silent sports community get immediately involved with steering the implementation of Act 168. This Act will prevent the safe use of our biking, hiking, riding, running, skiing, horseback riding and bird watching trails from October 15 to Memorial Day. If you do the math; this covers over 7 months of the year in which trapping and hunting could have access to your favorite state park in those exact same areas you have been enjoying for years. There are 5 listening sessions around the state which will lead to the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and Natural Resource Board (NRB) to finalize their proposals. Then on December 12 there is the open NRB board meeting in Madison which will for the most part finalize the Act implementation which will take effect January 1st, 2013.

As Dan Shuller of the DNR stated at the listening session I went to on October 29th, "this Act is law. It is up to the DNR and NRB to implement it." The NRB is considerably HFT friendly and will become more so in June when two new board member will be appointed by Governor Scott Walker.

I will classify this law into ok and bad. There are parts of the law which are attempting to promote hunting without infringing on our rights. This includes fishing and youth hunting in general. The onerous part of the law is when you get into hunting and trapping in the state parks. The system has worked very well to date. The DNR along with local interests had opened many places up for hunting in the parks. They did not open it up for trapping however. Rather than the hunting lobby addressing their desire to open some areas up for trapping and extended hunting they felt it was more expedient to simply open all Park lands up to HFT unless specifically closed by the DNR or NRB at the December meeting. This is a very overreaching law with little forethought and no regard for the majority of Park

users. I congratulate the HFT lobby and interests in making this happen. I hope the consequences of their success will be a much more vocal and demanding silent sports constituency.

This requires communication with local officials so we are heard as much as the noisy sports. The DNR staffer told me that the HFT interests are regularly at the DNR office pushing their agenda. We need to learn to make more noise ourselves.

The majority of speakers at the public hearing were pointing out the safety issues that will be created by this law. This is the strongest argument for limiting the extent of this law and keeping more areas closed to HFT. I keep stating that we need to close areas because by law Act 168 considers all State Park land to be open for hunting unless closed by the DNR and NRB. For Blue Mounds SP the vast majority of the ski, mountain bike and snow shoe trails will have to coexist with the hunters and trappers unless we get them closed before January 1st. This is a very lopsided Act if left as is because it disenfranchises the majority of park users.

There were lots of numbers talked about by speakers and one was that 7% of State Park visitors are hunters. That seems like a pretty big number, but that also means the 93% of visitors do not hunt. Since the law will be opening up large parts of the Parks to hunting that also means it will frighten off the 93% even if it is not a reasonable fear.

I ask you to write to your representatives in the Legislature. They passed the law and they will need to remove the law. Whether you think your representative agrees or disagrees with you it is very important that they know how you think. If you write them to agree they can tell their colleagues that they have gotten support letters, if you disagree with them they will get the message that their constituents are concerned about an issue even if they don't personally agree with the decision. If they don't know someone disagrees with them, their opinion will be strengthened even more.

If you want to actively rebel against this law the easiest thing to do is to not buy a State Parks sticker and to write your representatives that you are not going to buy one. Go skiing at a county park. Go camp at a private campground. Many people at the hearing made it clear they would go to Minnesota or Michigan instead of risk going to a Wisconsin park. This is a sad, yet understandable decision.

At the meeting I thought there were many good points concerning the explicit safety dangers of the Act. Of course the danger of a rifle shell, traveling over 1000 yards, finding an unintended target is scary. Beyond the general nature of traps which are cruel to animals; there is the fear that a dog, adult or child may happen upon trap and be hurt or disabled by a trap. I heard that one public benefit of trapping is the reduction of the nuisance coyote population. I'm not sure on this, but I would let the experts decide. One of the three pro HFT advocates to speak conveyed his opinion that traps are more species specific and they are better than they used to be. That is great, but being better doesn't make them perfect and there are few regulations prohibiting the bad traps.

Many hunters identified themselves as such, but adamantly opposed the Act from a safety perspective. This was most evident from the Slack Road neighborhood (near Gibraltar Rock north of Madison) where at least 8 people spoke of closing this entire section to hunting/trapping. This is a narrow property and in the DNR's interest to support the law they are recommending a hunting/trapping area only 250 yard wide. This same area is bordered by a trail on one side and houses on the other. A good point that came out of this example was each area needs to be walked or have the local residents as part of the plan. This may be impossible since the law goes into effect so quickly. I do expect the DNR and NRB to take some proposals such as this one to heart and close them, but the vast majority will get opened to HFT.

I realize as a democracy we don't always get what we want when we are a minority and that just by having a majority we can't expect to get everything we want either. Thomas Jefferson was quoted as saying "All, too, will bear in mind this sacred principle, that though the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail, that will to be rightful must be reasonable; that the minority possess their equal rights, which equal law must protect, and to violate would be oppression." This law is not reasonable in its pursuit of overextending rights for the HFT minority at the extraordinary expense of the majority; the silent sports community. Depending on how this Act is implemented I will feel oppressed. Feeling oppressed and being controlled by fear are two different things, I will continue to run in Blue Mounds State Park. I can run there is 7 minutes from my house, and won't need to buy an annual Park sticker.

I continue to focus on safety since that is my main argument to close more land to HFT. And in reality I am interested mainly in the effect of gun hunting and trapping. Fishing and bow hunting carries a much lower concern for me. It is not uncommon to hear about hunting accidents every November. Many of these are self-inflicted or even the cause of someone rolling over their ATV while hunting. With that said it would be impossible to claim that no third party person won't be hurt or even killed because of this near law. The more land that can be set aside and closed to hunting and trapping the safer the Parks will be.

After the meeting I think I had more new questions than before. For one I wonder "Why do the trappers in Wisconsin need to trap in the Parks". I can come up with 3 reasons. 1) They pay taxes so feel obliged to be able to hunt on state land, 2) parks are closer to where they live and are nice to be in, or 3) they have over trapped the traditional areas so need new ones. Secondly, I wanted to know how much land is open to hunting already. On the DNR website they state "Wisconsin has an abundance of land open to hunting, including state, national, and county forests, state-managed wildlife, fisheries, and natural areas, and private land enrolled in the Managed Forest Law (MFL), Forest Crop Law (FCL), Voluntary Public Access (VPA), or Wisconsin Damage and Abatement Claims (WDACP) programs. Combined, hunters have access to nearly seven million acres of land throughout Wisconsin!" It would seem that 7 million acres should be enough. Also, I would like to know the cost of this Act. I personally see sign removal as a huge cost. Then the cost to bring a request to the NRB to disallow hunting/trapping will be prohibitive and would likely be delayed due to the NRB's inability to address the large number of requests. Finally, I don't really understand how the HFT seasons in the state are laid out. Even though the Act is enforceable from October 15th to Memorial Day as proposed I don't think there are actually HFT seasons running continuously over this period.

If I could wave a magic wand I would grandfather the HFT status of all State Parks to the current level and then use the new law simply to address new additions to the system. I could also see opening up a portion of parks to extended hunting and maybe even trapping. In any letters we should explain what we want so the DNR, NRB and government in general understands the importance of the Silent Sports constituency. A very good suggestion at the meeting was that hunters and trappers register at the Park office so there is documentation of where they will be. Especially for knowing where traps may be set.

As a silent sports enthusiast I never really thought of advocacy as being very important. 'Of course I will always have access to state parks lands.' Now I come to learn that groups including the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation is steering the direction and intent of laws being passed. The list includes modifying governmental structure to benefit their interest, supporting Acts 168 and 118 concerning hunting and wetlands respectively. Both of these laws have good aspects, but they have become overreaching in the partisan, non-compromising political environment. Your voice can begin to change the flow of ideas bombarding your representatives.

There are two more public hearings on November 8th in Appleton and November 13th in West Allis, but

it is even easier to submit comments via email by November 23rd to the DNR at:
DNRWisconsinParks@wisconsin.gov

To investigate this more go to the DNR website and start clicking. Every state park has a map of the proposal:

<http://dnr.wi.gov/about/nrb/2012/act-168/act-168-listening-sessions.html>

Or find out how to contact your state representatives:

<http://www.wisconsin.gov/state/core/government.html>

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