

Despite an unprecedented outcry from the public, Wisconsin state parks and trails will be opened to hunting and trapping more than seven months a year starting Jan. 1

Wisconsin is a hunting utopia. More than 5 million acres of its beautiful land in forests, prairies, wetlands, glacial landscapes and farm fields are designated for hunting. So respected is the hunting tradition in Wisconsin that these grounds are provided for hunters in large part at taxpayer expense through tax subsidies for landowners.

What justification then can there be for the state to declare about 60,000 acres of the land in Wisconsin state parks open to hunting for more than half of the year?

Gov. Scott Walker's answer is that this is needed to counter unspecified actions by "unelected bureaucrats . . . threatening Wisconsin's proud sporting tradition" and eroding "our Second Amendment rights."

In that spirit, the Legislature passed Act 168, which, starting Jan. 1, opens all of the land in state parks and trails to hunting and trapping, except in areas specifically excluded by the Natural Resources Board.

This legislation is at once gratuitous and harmful. It serves no genuine need, yet is likely to diminish the enjoyment so many Wisconsin citizens experience in their splendid state parks.

The use of state parks by hunters and trappers under Act 168 should not be confused with the unobtrusive hunting that has been allowed in some of these parks for years, which has been limited mainly to deer and turkey hunting. Because these are short hunting seasons, people who were concerned about being in these natural areas when hunters were afoot could schedule their park visits for other times, and as a result there has been little conflict.

But under Act 168, the Department of Natural Resources proposed opening state parks and trails to hunting and trapping from Oct. 15 to the Thursday before Memorial Day.

Park users hate the idea. This is dramatically evident in letters, e-mails and telephone calls to the DNR. The agency reports that 96% of the 2,033 comments it has received from the public concerning Act 168 oppose hunting and trapping in state parks.

Natural Resources Board member Jane Wiley said, "Getting 2,000 comments sends an incredibly strong signal." She added it was the most e-mails the agency has ever received on a single issue.

Many of these comments are motivated by fear that a rifle or shotgun shot intended for an

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animal will hit a human being. Hunting is safer than many non-hunters assume; statistics reveal fewer deaths from hunting accidents than a number of other outdoor activities. Still, more than 100 people in the U.S. are accidentally killed by hunters each year, and it is understandable that there are worries that unlike in public hunting grounds, which non-hunters tend to avoid, the park-hunting law could dangerously juxtapose armed and unarmed park users. Many of the latter are families with children.

Suggestions from some supporters of Act 168 that park visitors should purchase and wear blaze orange clothing to improve their chances of avoiding a misaimed shot is an affront to people who have been using state parks long before the gates were opened to hunters (and paying for the privilege).

Snowshoers who venture far off trails have also voiced their concerns, as have dog owners who fear their pets could be caught in a trap meant for a wolf, coyote, fox or bobcat.

Many other park enthusiasts simply find hunting out of character with the quiet natural places they love for the opportunity to be near wilderness and wildlife.

The Natural Resources Board is required by Act 168 to open all properties in the state parks and trails system to hunting and trapping except where it is deemed unsafe to humans or a threat to rare plants and wildlife. The board has already decided to make about a third of the parks and trail land, mostly around park facilities and near urban areas, off limits to hunting, and was to meet this week to consider final restrictions.

The board should interpret the safety mandate as broadly as possible out of fairness to the more than 1.5 million Wisconsin residents who use Wisconsin state parks.

In the meantime, stuck with a bad law, state residents are left to contemplate the reason for the existence of Act 168. Hunters already have more land available than their diminishing numbers can use. State park use by campers, hikers, bird-watchers and nature lovers in general is surging. So, is it all about, as the governor seems to suggest, the Second Amendment, the gun-rights provision that, far from being threatened, has been affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court and bolstered in Wisconsin by concealed-carry and self-defense laws? Are the Legislature and the governor saying the Second Amendment guarantees the right to hunt in state parks?

Now there's a novel interpretation of the Constitution.

Editor's note: Just before this editorial went to press, the Natural Resources Board voted to reject the seven-plus-month season and allow hunting and trapping in most parks from Nov. 15 to Dec. 15. DNR secretary Cathy Stepp criticized the decision as failing to meet the expectations of the Legislature.

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