

# Impacts of COVID-19 on Nature and Economy in Northern New Hampshire

*Insights from Community Volunteers*

The global pandemic has had varying impacts on almost all aspects of communities and their economies. The northern three counties of New Hampshire are a unique region as their economic and natural histories differ in important ways from the rest of the state. Forestland, including the White Mountains National Forest, is an important defining feature and the economic trajectories of the region have been followed with great interest due to the past decline in forest product industries and present increase in recreation, tourism, and second home markets.

During the Summer of 2020, we interviewed 20 economic development and conservation volunteers about the impact of COVID-19 in 18 Northern NH communities as part of an ongoing research project on community resilience. The following brief shares some of the major findings.

Specifically, we find that town size, access to nature and community engagement have buffered some of the worst impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, challenges did arise for Northern New Hampshire communities, including lack of consistent broadband, increased and unsustainable visitation at recreation and tourism sites, and reduction in opportunities for socialization in person.

Community resilience can mean many things and over the past several years we have been exploring a framework that includes both economic, social, and ecological measures of resilience. We've focused on hearing from community volunteers about their roles in strengthening and bolstering their communities against unexpected change. Economic development and conservation committee volunteers play an important but often overlooked role in our communities and can provide valuable insight to conditions on the ground that are not measured easily by statistics. To that end, we reached back out to these volunteers to hear about the indirect impacts of COVID-19 in one on one interviews conducted via Zoom. After the interviews, we analyzed the transcripts for themes using content analysis.



*"People are clearly hopping into their vehicles and driving from where it is they are and coming here. On the one hand, it has its pros and cons - the pro, being the local businesses that can really use the help, and the con being the worry that it will unravel our efforts to keep the virus at bay"*

*-Economic Development Volunteer*



## Discussion of Interview Themes

Our interviews focused on hearing about the challenges communities were facing during the pandemic as well as some of the successes, with a particular focus on the economy and natural assets. We also asked what the future might look like.

### Overall Major Themes

COVID related challenges	COVID related successes	Future considerations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Broadband and cellular connectivity issues</li><li>Loss of in person social connections</li><li>Initial business closings and unemployment</li><li>Overuse or misuse of nature based- recreational assets</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Thoughtful communication within the community to share health and business/economic updates</li><li>Volunteer engagement and community spirit</li><li>Even greater appreciation for nature and the outdoors</li><li>Fewer major health impacts than other parts of the country</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>How this time will change work patterns and behavior</li><li>Speculation that more people will work more remotely</li><li>Continued appreciation for nature's role in quality of life and economic vibrancy</li><li>More focus on economic diversity and being prepared for future disruptions</li></ul>

### Looking Ahead

Many of the volunteers we spoke with shared interesting insight into how the pandemic may or may not change their communities. A conservation volunteer stated: "I think that the age of putting on your suit or tie or your business attire – I think those days are over. I think people first struggled to figure out the work-from-home thing. I think that this model from folks working from home at least a couple days a week is something we'll more of going forward... And I think there will be more of a focus on infrastructure and the environment." Both economic development and conservation volunteers shared similar sentiments and reflected on how nature will continue to play an important role in the quality of life of remote workers and others in their communities.

### Takeaways

Interviews with community volunteers in northern New Hampshire during the COVID-19 pandemic reveal insights about the local impacts of the pandemic and the factors that go into community resilience. Access to the natural environment plays an important role in these communities, both as an asset and a challenge in the face of large-scale disruptions. Even in natural resource amenity rich communities, other types of infrastructure, such as broadband and parking, restrooms and other services are key to economic resilience.

### Learn More

[extension.unh.edu/programs/nature-economy](https://extension.unh.edu/programs/nature-economy)

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Molly Donovan, [molly.donovan@unh.edu](mailto:molly.donovan@unh.edu)  
Shannon Rogers, [shannon.rogers@unh.edu](mailto:shannon.rogers@unh.edu)

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### About the Author

Shannon Rogers, Ph.D, is the State Specialist of Nature Based Economic Development as well as an Extension Professor at the University of New Hampshire. Sarah Garlick, Director of Science, Policy & Outreach at the Hubbard Brook Research Foundation, is co-author. The following contributed to this research project: Anna Stockman & Catherine Taylor, University of New Hampshire; Alexandra Contosta, University of New Hampshire; Peter Groffman, City University of New York; Pamela Templer, Boston University

### Contact Information

Shannon Rogers | (603) 862-5171 | [shannon.rogers@unh.edu](mailto:shannon.rogers@unh.edu)

[extension.unh.edu](https://extension.unh.edu)

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