CAMPING AND OTHER OUTDOOR PURSUITS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Responsible recreation

Outdoor groups urging recreationists to be considerate to others this summer

By Dennis Anderson
Star Tribune (Minneapolis)

Dennis Anderson / Minneapolis StarTribune-TNS

Vacationing and camping in the time of coronavirus: Consideration of other people, their health and surroundings, should be a priority.

MINNEAPOLIS — To its credit, a cadre of wildlife and outdoor groups has banded together to set guidelines, albeit modest ones, for campers, anglers, hunters, hikers and other outdoor recreationists during the pandemic.

One of the group's suggestions is to adhere to best practices for avoiding the coronavirus. Follow state and federal guidelines is another. And still another: "Pack out your trash as a courtesy to others and to avoid the appearance of overuse."

This effort — #responsiblerecreation — has been signed onto by many of the nation's conservation heavyweights, including the National Wild Turkey Federation and the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership.

On the umbrella group's website (responsible-recreation.org), a handful of proclamations by leaders of these outfits urge outdoors types to be considerate.

Becky Humphries, for example, chief executive of the National Wild Turkey Federation, offers that "this collaborative effort by the outdoor community is a reminder that while this country has numerous opportunities for recreation on its lands and waters, we need to do so in a manner that is respectful to the land and the rest of the public who also wish to enjoy these precious resources."

Like others of the group's directives, including those by Jeff Crane, president of the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, Humphries' admonition, by design, is quintessentially milquetoast.

Meaning, by Webster's definition, "Very timid, unassertive."

So timid that her decree, such as it is, recalls other soft-sell generalities issued to outdoor users over the years, including "don't litter"; its hippie-like variant, "leave no trace"; and the please, pretty-please plea to boaters to "clean, drain and dry" their watercraft to avoid spreading invasive species.

Also there's this doozy from the #responsiblerecreation bunch: "Share your adventures in a respectful way on social outlets."

Ultimately, such coddling isn't intended to achieve a positive measurable result.

The goal instead is to make the issuer feel good about going through the motions of "taking a stand" for the environment, conservation, the green new deal, solar power, hybrid cars — whatever — by suggesting ever so gently that the message recipient, the outdoors enthusiast — a descriptor with universal application — might want to consider, you know, if they have time, abiding by some minimum standard of behavior while boating, hiking, fishing, biking or otherwise being a tourist.

News flash:

• From Memorial Day weekend on, Americans will migrate outdoors in near-record numbers.

Another:

• Amid the current pandemic, in which more, not fewer, hospitalizations and more, not fewer, deaths are predicted in Minnesota in coming months, it's likely only a minority of these vacationers will adhere to the basics necessary to mitigate further transmission of the coronavirus.

I know because I've seen it.

Fishermen stroll into fish-cleaning houses that are already occupied. Boaters crowd onto docks that are already crowded with other boaters. And hikers, bicyclists and cabin owners stop for gas and bathroom breaks while heading to Brainerd, the North Shore or other destinations outstate ... with none of them, or very few, wearing masks.

Two points:

• Worldwide, coronavirus infections grew by 1 million in the past two weeks, and a single-day record 33 deaths was reported May 22 in Minnesota. The virus is extremely contagious, especially indoors. If you get it, you might have no problem. Or you might die.

• The risk that cops, conservation officers, paramedics, ambulance drivers, doctors and nurses will contract COVID-19 and perhaps die, increases when the people they serve don't make efforts to minimize transmission of the virus.

The paradox of this soon-to-occur summertime scattering of campers, boaters, anglers, paddlers and other vacationers into the hinterlands is that people who live in these rural areas, where the virus is generally less prevalent per capita, are nervous that the SUV-driving urbanites whose cash they otherwise covet might tote with them, in addition to little Jimmy, Joanie and Fido the dog, the coronavirus.

Yet — this is the paradoxical part — the farther one drives from the Twin Cities, the more cavalier people appear about the virus.

Gloves? Masks? Social distancing? Too often, it's not happening.

Exceptions exist. One is the Holiday station in Milaca, along Highway 169. Not only do shields at that location separate customers from cashiers, the cashiers wear masks.

Additionally, posted on the dividers, staring customers in the face, are signs saying: "I wear my mask to protect you. You wear your mask to protect me."

Unfortunately for the outfit's employees, of the three times I visited the station recently, only one other customer besides me wore a mask.

Read this far and still haven't caught the drift?

Here it is, sans coddling:

When vacationing this summer, especially while indoors in public places — whether campground bathrooms, grocery stores, wayside rests or gas stations — do the right thing.

Wash your hands. Keep a bottle of sanitizer handy. Practice social distancing.

And, as Dr. Deborah Birx, kingpin of the White House coronavirus task force, said Friday: When near other people, wear a mask.

Sewage study could lead to early warning for COVID-19 outbreaks

By Emily Brindley
Hartford Courant

By studying sewage at a New Haven, Connecticut, wastewater treatment facility, a team of Yale researchers has determined that genetic code embedded in feces could be used as an early warning sign of COVID-19 outbreaks.

The team, led by Jordan Peccia of the Yale School of Engineering and Applied Science, tested daily samples of sludge for bits of coronavirus code, known as RNA. They then found that they could use just their own data to recreate the curve of COVID-19 cases in the New Haven area.

"Except we see it seven days earlier," Peccia said.

Before you're symptomatic and after you're infected, you can certainly shed that virus and be infectious. As soon as you start shedding it, whether you feel it or not, we're gonna see it in the wastewater."

— Jordan Peccia, Yale School of Engineering and Applied Science

The study, which was posted online Friday but has not yet been peer-reviewed, has implications for Connecticut's coronavirus response. For the first two months of the pandemic, the state struggled to increase testing capacity. Even now, after a major testing ramp-up, clinical testing focuses on those who have symptoms.

That means patients often aren't tested until they begin showing symptoms, or may not be tested at all if they remain asymptomatic. In the meantime, they could be silently spreading the virus.

But sewage keeps a record of all cases.

"Before you're symptomatic and after you're infected, you can certainly shed that virus and be infectious," Peccia said. "As soon as you start shedding it, whether you feel it or not, we're gonna see it in the wastewater."

For their study, Peccia and his team collected daily sewage samples from the East Shore Water Pollution Abatement Facility in New Haven, from mid-March until May 1. They tested each sample's concentration of coronavirus RNA and then compared those daily concentrations to actual data on COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations in the towns served by the water treatment facility.

They found that the concentration of coronavirus RNA increased and decreased several days before corresponding fluctuations in actual COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations, as reported by the local hospital and the state.

According to the study, the sludge samples predicted hospitalization fluctuations three days before they occurred, and testing data fluctuations seven days before they occurred.

"I think it's pretty self-evident that if you can see what's going on earlier, that's better," Peccia said.

Sewage has been used as a public health indicator long before COVID-19 came on the scene, Peccia said.

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Merck joins race to create coronavirus vaccine

By Marie McCullough
The Philadelphia Inquirer

PHILADELPHIA — Merck, a global leader in vaccine development, is joining the frenzied rush to vanquish the coronavirus, announcing Tuesday that it is working on two vaccine candidates and a potential drug therapy.

Merck, which has its headquarters in New Jersey and has several facilities in Pennsylvania, is backing two vaccines that involve genetically engineering an inactivated virus as a vehicle to deliver proteins that provoke an immune response to the coronavirus.

Merck has acquired Vienna-based Themis, which is using a weakened strain of the measles virus as the delivery vehicle. Merck is also partnering with IAVI, a nonprofit research organization, on a coronavirus vaccine that uses VSV (vesicular stomatitis virus) as the delivery vehicle. VSV is the same technology on which Merck's Ebola vaccine is built.

Both experimental immunizations are completing testing in animals, and should begin human testing later this year, Merck said in news releases.

Merck is also collaborating with Miami-based Ridgeback Biotherapeutics on an oral antiviral treatment that was invented at Emory University and has undergone initial human safety tests.

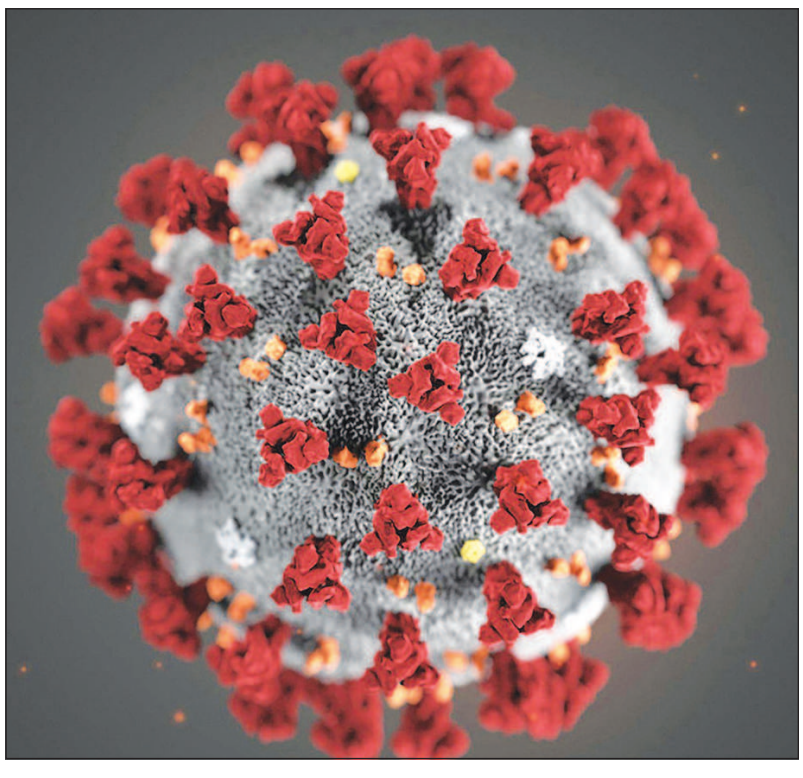
"COVID-19 is an enormous scientific, medical, and global health challenge. Merck is collaborating with organizations around the globe to develop anti-infectives and vaccines that aim to alleviate suffering caused by SARS-CoV-2 infection," Roger M. Perlmutter, president of Merck Research Laboratories, said in a statement.

Around the world, research is hurtling forward on more than 150 vaccines and 350 drugs intended to relieve the pandemic's devastation.

Merck had been conspicuously absent from the list of developers, including Pfizer, GlaxoSmithKline, Moderna, Inovio Pharmaceuticals, and research centers such as Philadelphia-based Wistar Institute and Thomas Jefferson University. But with more than 125 years at the scientific forefront and breakthroughs such as the cervical cancer vaccine Gardasil, Merck is a noteworthy addition.

New vaccines traditionally take a decade or more to come to market, from invention to approval to mass production. Nonetheless, experts have said a coronavirus vaccine using some of the latest technologies might be available by mid-2021.

Perlmutter sounded more cautious in an interview with STAT News. "I think the clinical development is going to take longer than people imagine," he said. "And I hate to sound what some people may regard as a sour note, but I don't want to overpromise."



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

This illustration provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows the 2019 novel coronavirus.