

Despite earlier debates,

By Jim Servi
Contributing Writer

Madison — One important measure of the Sporting Heritage Act went into effect Jan. 1, 2013, opening more than 62,000 acres of state park land to hunting and trapping — and it worked.

The DNR originally recommended opening parks for hunting and trapping from Oct. 15 through the Thursday prior to Memorial Day weekend. However, leading up to the passage of this bill, the DNR held five listening sessions across the state and received more than 2,000 comments, sparking a debate across much of the state.

The result was a modification to the original proposal. In response, hunting and trapping seasons were allowed in Wisconsin state parks from April 1 to the end of the third turkey season, and from Nov. 15 through Dec. 15. Deer hunting with a bow was extended

state park hunting, trapping a success

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Despite dire predictions by opponents of expanded state park hunting and trapping, the DNR received no reports of any problems or conflicts between sportsmen and other park visitors after fall seasons.

Photo by Tim Lemeister

The only concern that was brought to his attention before the gun deer season was from adjacent landowners who were worried about having hunters on their borders for the first time. Signs were placed throughout the parks, and there were no issues during the season. There were no disputes between users of the park reported during the hunting and trapping seasons.

In one case in Ashland County, an additional park ranger was sent to monitor the hunt as a precautionary measure, but there were no problems reported. Although there were no incidents, there were a small number of reported concerns that were resolved. For example, a deer was shot in a closed area in Potawatomi State Park in Door County. Based on a citizen call and investigation involving a DNR park ranger and conservation wardens, two deer were seized and two hunters were

issued citations by the ranger.

Although they didn't monitor harvest numbers or the numbers of people who took advantage of the expanded season, officials did monitor vehicle traffic.

"Overall the parks were very lightly attended during gun deer season, which was probably due to cold weather, but overall they saw many hunters and trappers take advantage of the additional opportunities," Schuller said.

Most state parks already had a long history of deer and turkey hunting, and those species remained the favorite, but Schuller said park superintendents did see many hunters and trappers take advantage of the new opportunities, as well. At Mirror Lake State Park, which has a healthy population of muskrats, trappers reportedly harvested 200 muskrats. Park managers reported that there was a fair amount of small-game hunting in southern state parks, as well.

Schuller also wanted to point out that there are several changes

that the agency is looking to implement for next year. First, the DNR plans to make the emergency rule that prohibited shooting across state trails and trails in the park boundaries a permanent rule. Next, it will become a permanent rule that trappers must use dog-safe traps on dry land as recommended by the Wisconsin Trappers Association. Last, the DNR plans to eliminate state parks as individual deer units and rather tie them into local management units. For example, Council Grounds State Park would no longer be Unit 52A. Rather, it would become part of Unit 52.

Schuller emphasized they would get rid of park-specific access permits and individual hunts because it is difficult to administer and applies only to certain species and not others.

"It just doesn't make sense to have permits for one species while there is open hunting for other species," Schuller said.

Several public hearings will be held on the proposed rules, as well as other potential changes that will impact park users. They may be reviewed and comments may be electronically submitted through the Wisconsin Administrative Rules website at adminrules.wisconsin.gov. Written comments on the proposed rule may be submitted via U.S. mail to: Scott Loomans, Department of Natural Resources, P.O. Box 7921, Madison, WI 53707-7921, or to scott.loomans@wisconsin.gov. Comments may be submitted until Jan. 24.

The remaining hearings will begin at 6 p.m.:

- Jan. 21, Eau Claire — DNR office, 1300 W. Clairemont Ave.
- Jan. 22, Wausau — Town of Rib Mountain Town Hall, 3700 N. Mountain Road.
- Jan. 23, Fitchburg — DNR Service Center, 3911 Fish Hatchery Road.

to the end of archery season in January. Many smaller and urban state parks remain closed to hunting and trapping, some parks have archery-only seasons, and others have special restrictions. Each state park has increased signage, and the DNR says that it is important to check before hunting and trapping to understand the hunting and trapping area boundaries and regulations for each park.

Much of the original debate centered on safety concerns and decreased opportunities for visitors who don't hunt or trap. Those concerns appear to have been laid to rest for now after a successful first year. According to Dan Schuller, DNR director of state parks, the expanded hunting and trapping opportunities were a success.

"It was a safe, enjoyable hunt that integrated well," Schuller said.