

# HOT TOPIC #9: March 29th

## Navigating Nature

*COVID-19 updates from San Juan County around subjects on the minds of islanders Navigating*

*This article is from Brandon Cadwell, Chief of Visitor and Youth Engagement at San Juan Island National Historical Park.*

Now is the time to take the road less traveled. Or perhaps, the trail or sidewalk less traveled. As the Chief of Visitor and Youth Engagement for the National Park Service on San Juan Island, and a member of San Juan County's COVID-19 response team, I'm encouraging all of us to go the extra mile – or extra trail head - to protect those we love.

For everyone's safety, many businesses are temporarily closed, gatherings are limited, and the Governor issued a 'Stay Home, Stay Healthy' order. For many, the feeling of being asked to do less and less has been feeling heavier and heavier. Several island residents have asked me what this all means in regards to getting outside. With the shelter at home order, Governor Inslee has expressly allowed and encouraged enjoying the outdoors while maintaining social distancing.

So, what are the rules?

Most local, state, and federal facilities have closed interpretive centers, restrooms, and campgrounds. For now, safe day-use is what currently is allowed. Access to day-use areas is quickly becoming limited. Washington State Parks and Department of Natural Resource lands are now complete closed. You can still find open public lands at:

- San Juan County Parks
- San Juan County Land Bank
- San Juan Preservation Trust
- National Park Service
- Bureau of Land Management

When you venture into the great outdoors, make sure to maintain the same precautions that have been prescribed indoors. If you're sick – stay home. Keep a minimum distance of six feet from others, and sanitize frequently used surfaces.

Might this be an opportunity for a challenge?

Students are staying home from school and many adults are at home, either by choice or necessity. To escape cabin fever, people are flocking to favorite trails and parks. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy recently audited their trail counters across the country and found a 200% increase on trails in areas with a 'stay-at-home' measure in effect. Substantially increased visitation is being noticed at my park, San Juan Island National Historical Park. South Beach, Jakle's Lagoon, the prairie, Young Hill, and Mitchell Hill are being swamped by those attempting to escape the great indoors. Now is not the time for your favorite hike, because in all likelihood, it's many others' favorite, too.

As you plan your outdoor excursions in the weeks and months ahead, I'd challenge you to look for the trails you haven't explored yet. It's also a great time to be creative! Walk through a new neighborhood in town that you've never visited or only driven through. If you have a friend with property out-of-town, ask their permission to walk through the woods. Explore, look closely, and be amazed at the sights and smells you may have missed by the "destination" of a trail. Get lost in the stillness of it.

Being outside is an uplifting experience. Though I may be biased as a park ranger, I'm also backed up by study after study that proves spending time outside increases dopamine levels in our brains and decreases our chances for depression. So get outdoors! Consider this a park prescription – just stay at least six feet away from anyone else.

We need to do what's best for ourselves, our friends, family, and neighbors. This means keeping our distance right now. Take the challenge and look for the road, trail, or sidewalk less traveled.

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