

When I first found out that I was being sent home to telework for at least 6 months because of the pandemic, my first thought was that this was going to be great as I could do a lot more hiking. I take vacation days just to take hikes, and I hike every weekend; in other words, I'm a serious hiker. So one of the first days I was teleworking, I headed out to my favorite hiking trailhead, only to discover that the parking lot was packed, with others circling the lot waiting for someone to leave. I felt like I was at the grocery store or the mall. Over the next few weeks, I tried different days, times, and trails, but my experience was similar. Lots of people on the trails and lots of cars in the parking lots. I was glad others were enjoying nature but frustrated that I wasn't able to do so at the same level I could pre-pandemic. When I was able to snap a parking space and go on a hike, I discovered a new world on the trail. Much more trash and lots more noise. Most regular hikers pack out when they bring in and keep their voices low in order to hear the birds and the wind through the trees. It seemed that the increase in hikers came not only from hikers being able to get out more often but also from people who weren't regular hikers and who didn't have the same level of respect for the land, animals, and other hikers. Most of the hikers didn't wear masks and didn't hesitate or turn their faces away while passing you on the trail, all while talking loudly to their co-hikers. Social distancing was not on many individuals' minds. In one case, I wish someone had spoken to me because just down the trail from where they passed me was a rattlesnake. I did catch the word "rattlesnake" in their conversation when they passed me but they didn't convey this fact to me. Lucky for me I look out for snakes! So instead of hiking being a refuge, it became a somewhat unpleasant experience, similar to walking down a busy city sidewalk where everyone ignored each other and sometimes good manners. I hope that people have gained a new appreciation for hiking and that new trails are established because of the great use during the pandemic, but I also hope that hiking becomes a way for people to enjoy nature and pick up tips from fellow hikers.