Loosen up, Massachusetts, and let us enjoy the outdoors — responsibly

As the coronavirus shutdown stretches into the summer months, the state and other entities should loosen restrictions on those outdoor activities that can accommodate social distancing.

By The Editorial Board  Updated May 6, 2020, 11:57 a.m.

With the date of the reopening of the state unknown, the future of the American Legion Beach at Stevens Pond in North Andover this summer is uncertain. The pond is the town's municipal beach. JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF
The glorious weekend weather delivered a long-overdue reminder of how joyful spring and summer in New England can be — and how strange, frustrating, and sad this particular summer is likely to be.

The novel coronavirus, which has already killed more than 4,000 people in Massachusetts, almost certainly won’t be gone. Epidemiologists warn that if COVID-19 appears to recede in the coming months, it could be a temporary reprieve before another wave of infection hits in the fall and winter. This means that much about our current way of life will remain in effect this summer. We’ll need to keep our distance from other people and wear masks.

But given these precautions, many outdoor activities that are currently prohibited or discouraged by towns, cities, or the state should be allowed to resume. Sweeping restrictions ought to give way to a more case-by-case, facility-by-facility approach.

Going to the beach and campgrounds, playing tennis or shooting hoops with your own family members, golfing with friends, and picnicking with other families at a distance can be crucial activities for physical and mental health, and they do not necessarily create dense crowds or other conditions in which the coronavirus is likely to spread. “If managed properly, the risks can be low,” says Joseph Allen, assistant professor in the department of environmental health at Harvard’s T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

For example, beaches, campgrounds, and other outdoor recreation spots could be opened on a limited basis. Parking might be limited to, say, 25 percent of capacity to start, depending on the site, and bathrooms could be restricted to allow no more than one person or family at a time. Or admission could be restricted by requiring timed-entry passes obtained in advance. In all these cases, the message would be: Use of this site is acceptable if people can responsibly keep their distance. And if they don’t, the privilege can be taken away.
“During a pandemic, I would hesitate to say anything has zero risk,” says Dr. Richard Besser, who is a former acting head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the current CEO of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and a member of a panel of health experts advising the governor of New Jersey. “But I would say sitting 8 feet away from somebody on a beach is pretty low risk.”

When the extensive spread of the coronavirus became apparent in Massachusetts and other states in March, a blanket ban on many activities was the right call. Preventing the potential exponential growth of the virus — “flattening the curve” of the burden on hospitals — required a clear and urgent directive to stay home as much as possible.

But things are a bit different now, and not only because people have been feeling isolated and cooped up indoors. The worst-case scenario of overwhelmed hospitals has been avoided. Although it’s still imperative to keep the curve from rising again, it should be possible to remain vigilant while letting people do more outside of their homes. After all, the concept of social distancing has now been firmly ingrained. More than 93 percent of people in a recent statewide poll reported that they are adhering to “very strict” or “pretty strict” social distancing. Wearing masks has taken hold too, albeit to a lesser extent. (Since there seems to be some confusion about the governor’s rule: Masks are required outdoors unless you can keep more than 6 feet from everyone else.)

And despite the understandably widespread fears about an infected person coughing or sneezing the virus well beyond 6 feet, scientific evidence so far supports the conclusion that wind and other factors in the open air make it unlikely that an infectious dose will be transmitted that way. “I am not aware of any research that specifically contradicts the premise of the low risk of transmissibility outdoors — provided social distancing is observed,” says Angela Rasmussen, a virologist at Columbia University. “So while going jogging in a park or relaxing on a beach at a distance from other beachgoers is low risk, an outdoor concert where there are crowds would likely be much riskier, depending on crowd density.”
Reducing restrictions this spring, when so many Massachusetts residents continue to die from COVID-19 every day, might seem premature. But it’s exactly because the coronavirus will likely remain a threat for some time that the rules for public conduct should become more nuanced. For months to come, residents will need to cooperate with restrictions on their freedom. That’s a sacrifice the vast majority of people are willing to make — for now. To maintain the public’s trust in public health guidance over the long haul, those rules can’t come to seem rigid, indiscriminate, or arbitrary, and the state needs to show that it is willing to change them as our scientific understanding of the virus evolves and as social distancing and mask-wearing habits take root.

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