

Forest visits in Switzerland affected by coronavirus lockdown

June 3 2020, by Beate Kittl / Reinhard Lässig



During the lockdown, people-induced stress among forest visitors was minimal, and confined to forests near towns and cities. Credit: Reinhard Lässig, WSL

The lockdown that began in mid-March to contain the coronavirus epidemic had a marked effect on the forest visiting habits of the Swiss population, according to a unique comparison of two surveys conducted by the Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research

(WSL) before and during the crisis.

At the height of the Swiss lockdown in early April, many people were visiting forests more regularly than before the restrictions on their movement were introduced. However, far more were visiting much less or not at all. That is what emerges from a remarkable comparison of two surveys by WSL researchers carried out before and during the lockdown.

As part of the Socio-Cultural Forest Monitoring (WaMos) project, a detailed nationwide survey of the Swiss population's relationship with the forest is carried out every 10 years or so on behalf of the Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN). The third WaMoS survey is currently under way. WSL developed the concept and methodology for this [national survey](#) of 8,000 people, which was conducted online by the LINK Institute, and is now evaluating the results. This survey had nothing to do with the coronavirus and ended on 9 March, prior to the lockdown.

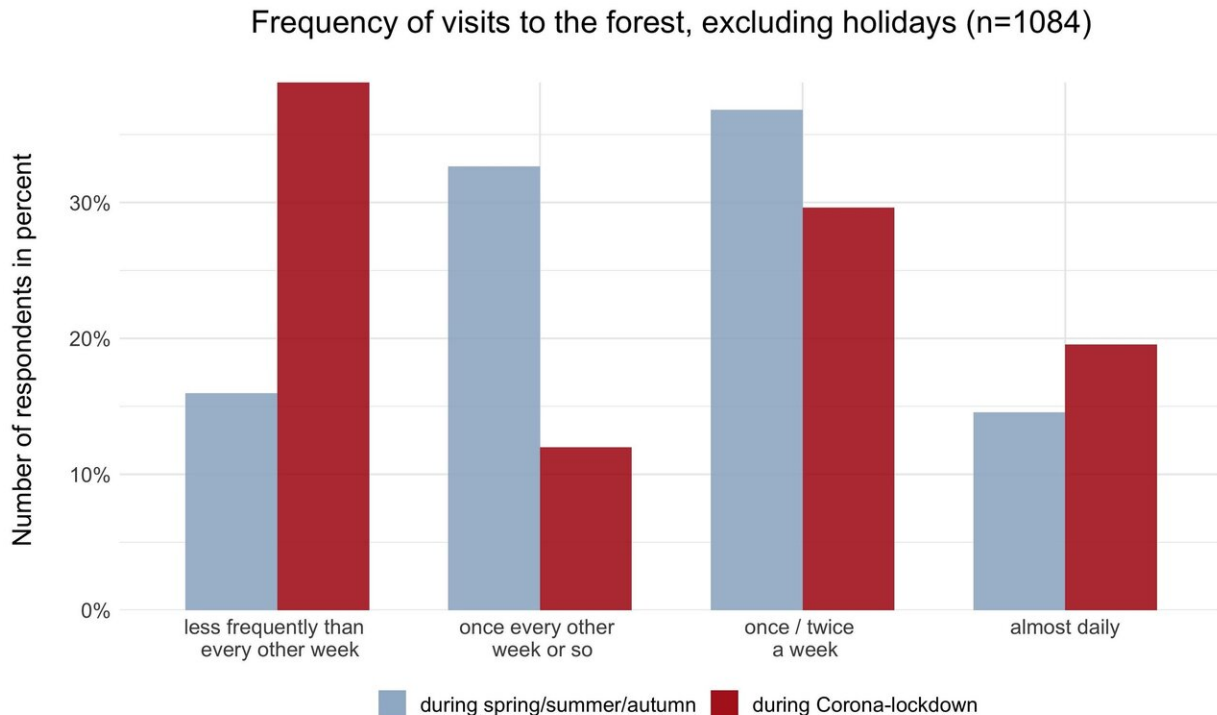
Significant reduction in occasional visits

The team led by Marcel Hunziker, head of the WSL Social Sciences in Landscape Research group, took the unique opportunity to repeat the recently completed survey in early April during the lockdown. Just over 1,000 of the people who had taken part in the first survey were questioned again, but this time only about recreational use of the forest.

Given the spring-like weather in early April, the researchers compared what the respondents had said about the frequency of their forest visits in the first few weeks of the lockdown with how often they had reported normally going to the forest during the warmer months of the year. The results indicated two contrasting trends in the frequency of forest visits, with very many people going much less often than they usually would in the warmer months of the year, but many also going much more

frequently. By contrast, the number of 'occasional' forest visitors was down (see chart). The results also suggest that forest visits during the lockdown were shorter on average and closer to home than usual.

Town and city dwellers seeking refuge in the forest



Respondents' answers before and during the coronavirus lockdown clearly show that very many people in Switzerland went to forests less often than usual, while others did so more often. Credit: WSL

There were clear differences between Switzerland's language regions and between urban and rural areas. In the German-speaking part of the country, the frequency of additional forest visits was markedly higher than in the other language regions. By contrast, Italian-speaking areas

saw an increase in the number of those who reported that they very rarely visited the forest. The researchers ascribe this to the greater prevalence of coronavirus cases in southern Switzerland. French-speaking Switzerland was between the two.

During the lockdown, significantly more town and [city dwellers](#) visited the forest each day than in a normal spring. This could be because many urban green spaces (such as parks or waterside promenades) were either closed or avoided by residents because of social distancing. However, outside towns and cities, the number of forest visits declined.

Reasons for visiting affected by coronavirus

There was also a shift in people's motivation for visiting forests, from socialising (meeting friends and family, having fun, picnics, etc.) to keeping fit and looking after their physical and mental health.

Those who avoided forests did so primarily for coronavirus-related reasons, in particular because they belonged to a risk group or simply as a self-imposed precaution (to avoid becoming infected). This is borne out by the fact that some people felt more disturbed than usual by the greater numbers of recreation seekers (i.e. potential sources of infection) using the forest. On the whole, however, those who spent time in forests during the lockdown were more tolerant than usual: people reported feeling disturbed less often than normal during forest visits, even by mountain biking, which is a common source of irritation for those seeking relaxation. Could this be evidence of greater mutual understanding and social cohesion at a time of crisis?

"The fact that the lockdown happened immediately after our large forest survey and that the follow-up survey allowed us to directly compare people's forest visiting habits before and during the crisis was a stroke of luck as far as this research topic is concerned," explains Marcel

Hunziker. "It means we can analyse not only the forest visits themselves but also how they were affected by the [lockdown](#), and so assess the importance of the [forest](#) in times of crisis." This will provide key input for future crisis-management strategies, given the importance of forests as places of relaxation and recreation in Switzerland, especially near urban areas, and the vital role of relaxation and recreation during a crisis.

Provided by Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research WSL

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