

Outdoor recreation powers Lake Tahoe economy

By Susan Wood

“In or out?” This was the question posed by many mothers to their children in respect to the opening and closing of their home’s front door.

It appears these kids grew up opting for the outdoors – opening the door to growth in the lucrative outdoor recreation market now measuring at least \$373 billion by the federal Bureau of Economic Analysis.

With Lake Tahoe being an outdoor paradise, the lifestyle is the norm for the two states it straddles.

From fishing charters and coolers to e-bikes and smaller backpacking gear, the stuff we do and carry has created a big business to shops catering to enthusiasts on all four sides of the lake and Reno.

“The desire for people to get outdoors is strong. We get mothers who have had their kids, and it’s opened a window for a whole new market,” said Jared Lopez, the gear guru at REI in Reno. “There’s definitely something going on.”

Lopez made the case for basing the outdoor gear giant’s surge in growth to people wanting to escape being a slave to their electronic devices. It seems the manufacturers have answered the call.



Fly fishing guide Matt Heron never gets tired of his sport. Photo/Keith Brauneis

For those needing power, solar generators by Goal Zero are compact and energy efficient in a 150-watt package starting at \$199 retail. This represents an ideal alternative to the noisy, stinky, clunky gas-powered versions.

REI can barely keep up with the demand for Yeti coolers that are bear resistant – a must for car campers and fishing enthusiasts. The big-boy Tundra model at 160-liter capacity often sells out and could put you out \$350 retail.

The Roadie is smaller with a handle but can still support a person standing on top of it.

“A lot of fishermen have to stand on coolers to get a cast,” Lopez explained.

Fly fishing tour guide Matt Heron has found his sport “tagged the rich old man’s sport” is no longer just that as it’s changed into new generations and genders.

The Truckee River guide has seen his North Shore business grow. In 12 years, the season starting in May has increased

from an average of one person a day to 12.

“There’s a better quality product for entry level anglers, and more people can afford it,” Heron said. Some of these people can pop over \$500 for the right rod, now wrapped in a flexible graphite.



MSR stoves come with radiant heat, so no problem with wind. Photo/Susan Wood

Heron recently took out two first-timers who had the time of their lives. The two women represent Resort Mountains Cities, a 29-year-old destination management company that appeases clients seeking outdoor adventures.

As if Heron ordered it, both women landed fish right away.

“It’s pretty magical out there,” RMC saleswoman Stacie Krenicki told *Lake Tahoe News*. “We’re always in a rush. When you’re fishing, you have to calm down and relax and be yourself.”

Her colleague in RMC operations, Jaime Haddad, was shocked by how much she enjoyed the sport.

“I would have been out there all day. I truly have the bug,” said Haddad, who clad in chest-high waders caught a 20-incher.

In California, outdoor recreation generates \$92 billion in consumer spending, according to a 2017 report by the Outdoor Industry Association. Over the border, OIA states Nevada spurs \$12.6 billion in purchases. Much of this figure comprises receipts for outdoor gear.

After all, Nevada Travel’s mantra is “Don’t fence me in.”

The same thing could be said for quantifying the industry totaling \$887 billion in size. The OIA used a methodology that included touring companies, travel expenses and outdoor gear made here and overseas.



SUP Tahoe owner Brandon Miller has a fleet of VESL boards to show off. Photo/Susan Wood

The BEA’s figure is less than half that because it chose not to factor in travel expenses on recreation trips less than 50 miles from home and gear manufactured outside the country.

Even with the discrepancy, U.S. officials have discovered an

often-overlooked means of consumer spending that comprises 2 percent of the U.S. Gross Domestic Product – something Tahoe recreation-oriented businesses have long known about.

According to the OIA study, over half of residents in Nevada's 2nd Congressional and California's 4th Congressional District where Tahoe lies on the map participate in one of the activities that consist of fishing, backpacking, climbing, hunting and cycling.

South Lake's Tahoe Sports Ltd. has launched a fleet of e-bikes in the hopes of expanding on its human-powered variety. Owner Mark Gandt is giddy with excitement over the new German-inspired technology. One lithium battery charge can power the 20-speed, pedal-assist Haibike for 30 miles.

"This is the future," he said, comparing it to the fat ski evolution. "It's the biggest change in the sporting goods industry in years."

Pedaling can easily prompt the bike to travel 30mph. Like cycling technology overall, the price range isn't for the faint of heart, running between \$2,500 and \$6,000.



Carabiners are lighter in weight, but more durable. Photo/Susan Wood

At age 83, retired South Lake Tahoe surgeon Larry Foster didn't hesitate popping that much at the South Lake Tahoe shop.

"I've been mountain biking for 40 years. Once I turned 60, I can no longer make it up the high country trails. The e-bike allowed me to go back to my old trails," he told *LTN*.

Traditional mountain bikes have still ruled the pedaling market. These days, the rage there lies in full suspension bikes to overcome the shock of hard objects encountered. Tahoe's steep hills also require a quick release on the seat post – up for the ascent, down for the descent.

"People come from all around the world and want to ride our terrain," said Russ Stewart of Village Ski Loft. The Incline Village shop offers several demos and rentals.

Tahoe adventure seekers who pound the trail may also take solace in technological breakthroughs with hydrophobic sleeping bags, in which every feather is treated. Plus, the pads they sleep on are twice as thick but weigh the same as those from four years ago – 1 pound, 5 ounces, Tahoe Sports Ltd. gear hound Jay Sell noted.

Backpacks have gotten lighter with larger capacities too and adjustable holes for better fitting.

Stoves have become more efficient by using radiant heat. The MSR Windburner even comes equipped with a pot at \$159 suggested retail.

Climbers will also find carabiners are now lighter yet stronger for building rope anchors and confidence belaying off them. With just a small addition of a metal piece planted at the carabiner opening, a swift bang on a rock won't open the

device.

From rock to water, outdoor gear has changed dramatically over the last five years.

With that revolution, paddleboards have surged in popularity. One obstacle remains the price for the new sport.

The early adopters who took up the sport back then are now graduating from a beginner board to more of a touring board that allows them to go farther without breaking the bank.

“Many people going on the second board want something with enough volume that’s stable, but 95 percent of these people are price conscious,” SUP Tahoe owner Brandon Miller told *Lake Tahoe News*. That’s why the South Lake Tahoe business provides 11-, 12- and 13-foot VESL boards this summer to find that happy medium between speed and stability – ones sold for under \$1,000.

“It’s a balancing act,” he said.

Balancing is something Dax Willards is hoping will catch on quickly as he sells and rents the Onewheel at his West Shore shop. Billed as an alternative to a skateboard, a user propels forward with simple weight shifts. The one center wheel is durable enough to handle the rocks and ruts of Tahoe terrain. It retails for \$1,499.

Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber Chief Executive Officer Steve Teshara hopes the feds will invest in the infrastructure since studying the industry’s merit.

“It’s great the federal government recognizes outdoor recreation now, but it’s critical (it) puts the emphasis on operations and management and invests in it,” Teshara said.