

Protected Lands and Economics:

A Summary of Research and Careful Analysis on the Economic Impact of Protected Lands

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Introduction:

How western communities and counties can benefit from nearby federal lands has been an issue for local leaders, officials, businesses, and others for generations. This document summarizes a variety of scientific research on the economic impact of protected lands such as Wilderness, National Parks, or National Monuments to nearby communities, especially in the West.

Summary:

Although every county has its own set of unique circumstances, numerous studies—carefully scrutinized to pass scientific muster and credibility—have concluded that protecting federal public lands can play a positive role for the communities and economies nearby.

Brief Discussion:

There is a large body of peer-reviewed literature that examines the relationship between land conservation, and local and regional economic well-being. Because of the number of different county types in the West, let alone the entire United States, sweeping declarations about the economic performance of all counties in a region should be scrutinized carefully.

It is not surprising that the impact of protected lands such as Wilderness or National Parks is measurable in some places (e.g., isolated rural areas and those rural areas more connected to larger markets and population centers via air travel) but not in others (e.g., metro areas; imagine trying to document the effect of the Sierra Estrella Wilderness to Phoenix's economy).

Protected Lands and Prosperity in the West

The western economy has changed significantly in recent decades. Services industries that employ a wide range of people—from doctors and engineers to teachers and accountants—have driven economic growth and now make up the large majority of jobs, even in rural areas. At the same time, non-labor income, which consists largely of investment and retirement income, is the fastest source of new personal income in the region.

Sample of Peer-Reviewed Research

A sample of peer-reviewed research on protected public lands can assist western communities working to promote a more robust economic future:

- Protected public lands can and do play an important role in stimulating economic growth—especially when combined with access to markets and an educated workforce—and are associated with some of the fastest growing communities in the West (Rasker 2006).
- Wilderness designation enhances nearby private property value (Phillips 2004).
- Wilderness is associated with rapid population, income, and employment growth relative to non-Wilderness counties. Services jobs are increasingly mobile, and many entrepreneurs locate their businesses in areas with a high quality of life (Lorah and Southwick 2003).

- Conserving lands, which creates a new visibility for them through protective designations, also helps safeguard and highlight the amenities that attract people and businesses (McGranahan 1999).
- Public lands conservation is associated with more robust population growth (Lewis, Hunt and Plantinga 2002).
- Another study found that while Wilderness recreation benefits to local communities are modest, the presence of Wilderness appears to draw residents and new economic activity, and has a substantial positive impact on local economies (Rudzitis and Johnson 2000).
- A study of 250 non-metro counties in the Rocky Mountains found no evidence of job losses associated with Wilderness and no evidence that counties more dependent on logging, mining, and oil and gas suffered job losses as a result of Wilderness designation (Duffy-Deno 1998).
- Outdoor recreation is important to western economies. In New Mexico, the Outdoor Industry Foundation (OIF) reports that active outdoor recreation contributes \$3.8 billion annually to the state's economy, supporting 43,000 jobs. Nationally, OIF estimates an economic impact of \$730 billion from active outdoor recreation (bicycling, camping, fishing, hunting, paddling, snow sports, wildlife viewing, and trail-running, hiking, climbing), supporting 6.5 million jobs (Outdoor Industry Foundation 2006).
- For many seniors and soon-to-be retirees, protected public lands and recreation provide important aspects of a high quality of life. Non-labor sources of income already represent more than a third of all personal income in the West and will grow as the Baby Boomer generation retires (Frey 2006).
- Protected natural amenities—such as pristine scenery and wildlife—help sustain property values and attract new investment (Deller and Tsai 2001).

Recent Federal Statistics

In addition to the above peer-reviewed research, a quick review of statistics from the U.S Census Bureau and the U.S. Department of Commerce shows that by three measures (average annual net migration, average annual change in employment, and average annual change in personal income) counties in the lower 48 states with Wilderness, on average, do better than those without Wilderness. The findings for these three federal measurements also hold true for rural (non-metro) counties across the U.S.

Looking at the eleven Western continental states as a region (both metro and non-metro counties), counties with Wilderness, on average, have higher net in-migration than counties without Wilderness, but there is no discernable difference between employment or personal income growth. This also is true looking only at rural (non-metro) Western counties.

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Related Resources:

A summary of regional reports, case studies, tools, a library of additional research, and related news articles on the value of western protected public lands is available here:

<http://headwaterseconomics.org/land/reports/protected-lands-value/>.

Research Cited:

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