

Dollars and Sense

Five ways that protected **wilderness** boosts community, personal pocketbooks



Hiker on Superior Trail, Minnesota. Photo by Richard Hamilton Smith

Rural economies are changing across America. The role of extractive industries like logging and mining has diminished considerably and is being replaced in part by a nature-based economy. And an increasing number of rural communities are confirming that protecting wilderness is good for the environment *and* their economy.

The benefits that flow from protected wild lands are now the dominant economic drivers in many rural areas. Scenic vistas make communities attractive to businesses and employees seeking the highest quality of life. Wild lands in rural Western counties have led to income, employment, and population growth.¹ They also increase nearby property values for home owners and generate recreation and tourism dollars. Additionally, protected wild lands provide a number of vital natural services such as filtering our drinking water.

“Fishermen from all over the country come here to fish for salmon in the waters of the Elk River. This brings a vital economic boost during the lull in our tourism driven economy. Restaurants, motels, R.V. parks, grocery stores, hardware stores, art galleries, advertisers and fishing guides benefit from this eco-based winter tourist industry. There is not a business in this community that does not receive a beneficial dollar during the hardest months of their economic year.”

—Port Orford/North Curry County Chamber of Commerce, in supporting the Copper-Salmon Wilderness Act.

Designated Wilderness and their healthy landscapes ...

Attract businesses and their employees.

Businesses decide to locate and stay near protected landscapes for reasons such as scenic amenities, rural character of towns and proximity to wildlife-based recreation. These reasons far outrank labor costs and tax incentives.² Another study found that a majority of people, 53 percent, cited wilderness as an important reason they moved to their county of residence.³ The migration and retention of both businesses and their talented workforces foster regional economic development and provide a strong base for local economies.

If 100 retired households come to a community in a year, each with a retirement income of about \$40,000, their impact is similar to that of a new business spending \$4 million annually.⁴ This is because retirees increase the tax base and have a stable investment income that increases employment and stimulates the economy when spent locally. Retirees are often attracted to natural amenities provided by public land and bring their non-labor income with them.

Increase property values.

Economic studies have demonstrated that wilderness boosts residential property values.⁵ The per-acre price of residential land in towns that have some wilderness acreage is almost 19 percent higher than in towns that contain no wilderness. The higher property values, meanwhile, can contribute to lower tax rates because municipalities can generate the same amount of revenue from lower taxes.⁶

Boost personal income.

Per capita income in isolated rural counties with protected land grows faster than in isolated counties without any protected lands. One study found that from 1970 to 2000, per capita income in isolated rural counties with protected land grew more than 60 percent faster.⁷ Scenic rural counties exhibited higher employment and income growth from 1990-1995.

Real per capita incomes grew 1.2 percent annually, compared with 0.4 percent for moderately scenic counties and 0.1 percent for other rural counties.⁸ Counties adjacent to urban areas have grown faster due to contact with an urban economy.



Fishing on Greys River, Wyoming. Photo by Scott Bosse, courtesy Greater Yellowstone Coalition.

A study of 113 rural counties in the American West, 43% containing designated wilderness areas, showed that population, income, and employment growth increased with percent designated wilderness from 1970 - 2000. Economic activities associated with wilderness included investment income and nonfarm self-employment income growth.⁹

Catalyze the recreation and tourism industries.

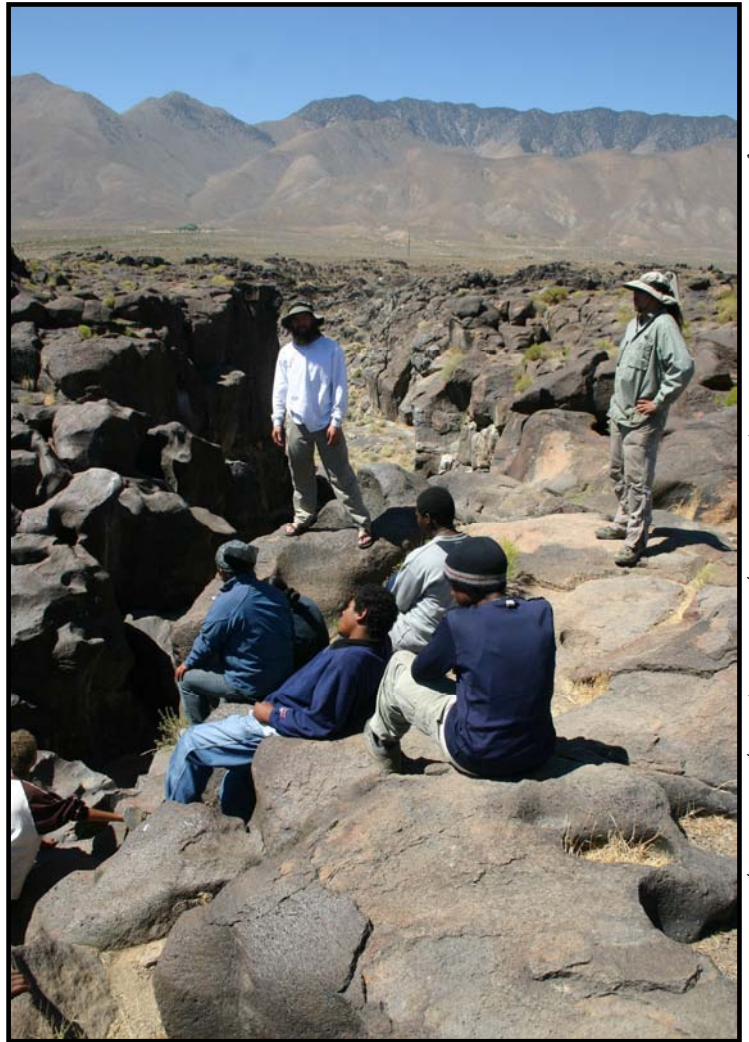
The Outdoor Industry Association found that outdoor recreation contributes \$730 billion to the American economy while supporting 6.5 million jobs.¹⁰ On average, each 10,000 acres of protected wilderness provides 18 new jobs in local communities.¹¹ A California study of just a single county found that wilderness generated \$31.9 million in personal income, \$50.2 million in sales revenue, and 882 jobs.¹² Outdoor recreation is good for hotels, restaurants, guides, grocery stores and more.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service reported that 87 million US residents age 16 and older participated in wildlife-related recreation in 2006. \$122 billion was spent on fishing, hunting, and wildlife watching.¹³

Perform natural services worth billions of dollars.

Wilderness provides – free of charge – a host of “ecosystem services,” including air and water filtration, climate regulation, pest control, and seed dispersal. One study of federally designated wilderness in the lower 48 states put the value of some of these services at between \$2.0 billion and \$3.5 billion per year.

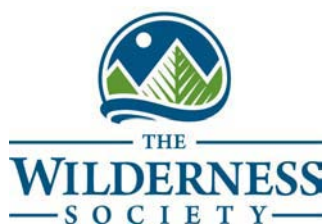
Broken down a little further, one estimate puts the value of watershed protection, carbon storage, climate regulation, and waste treatment at \$174 per acre per year. A rough estimate of the value of carbon stored in wilderness forests is \$2.4 billion annually.¹¹ The U.S. Forest Service, meanwhile, estimated that one-fifth of America’s population get their water from sources with headwaters on national forests – a value worth \$3.7 billion each year.¹⁴



Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument, California. Photo by Michael Garcia, courtesy Conservation System Alliance.



Vermillion Cliffs National Monument, Arizona. Photo by Denise Ryan.



“Wilderness and other protective designations have been shown to increase local tourism and to attract new residents who treasure the quality of life that preserved lands provide. This preservation is crucial for maintaining a healthy economy...As local Chambers of Commerce, we are dedicated to achieving business growth and prosperity while maintaining our unique quality of life. By attracting tourists and new residents, providing recreational opportunities for our communities, and protecting scenic vistas, this legislation aids us in achieving that mission.”

—Yucca Valley Chamber of Commerce, in supporting the California Desert and Mountain Heritage Act.

Learn more: Visit <http://wilderness.org/content/natural-dividends-wildland-protection> to read a report that examines the economic impact of wilderness on the Rocky Mountain West.

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