

Conservation Pays in Big Ways

The Economic Benefits of Land Conservation

By Timothy S. Jacobson

Some people believe that land set aside for conservation purposes is a drag on the economy. This is a prevalent and unfortunate misunderstanding.

President Theodore Roosevelt once said:

“There is nothing more practical than the preservation of beauty and the preservation of anything that appeals to the higher emotions of mankind. I believe we are past the stage of national existence when we could look on complacently at the individual who skinned the land and was content for the sake of three year's profit for himself to leave a desert for the children of those who were to inherit the soil.”

Unfortunately, it seems that Teddy Roosevelt may have been overly optimistic in assuming that America was past the stage of wantonly exploiting natural resources to our long-term detriment.

There are numerous economic benefits to land conservation:

- conserved land acts as a multi-billion-dollar generator of economic activity year-after-year as a result of opportunities for hiking, trout fishing, cross-country skiing, hunting, camping, bicycling, and sustainable timber harvest and farming
- conserved land and parks boost land values and property taxes
- studies demonstrate increased residential property values
- conserved areas boost local economies by attracting businesses and residents
- good parks and conservation areas encourage economic development
- conservation is a money-saving alternative to sprawling residential and commercial development

Natural resources and other attractions generate billions per year in tourism revenue, create millions of fulltime jobs and generate billions of annual tax revenue. Farms and agricultural businesses generate hundreds of billions, if not trillions, of dollars of economic activity and provide jobs for millions more people, according to studies, like one conducted by University of Wisconsin-Extension.

By protecting the most precious natural areas and working farms that generates billions of dollars each year, land trusts are helping ensure the viability of our economy for generations to come. It's not about quick bucks and exploiting resources—it's about sustainability and the long haul.

Conserving the best parts of our landscape not only protects wildlife habitat and enhances quality of life for people, but it makes good business sense, too.

Tami Woods, director of catering for the Radisson Hotel in La Crosse, Wisconsin sees the tangible value of protecting the scenic beauty of the Driftless Area landscape. She said, “Every workday, I talk to people from around the country and around the world who comment favorably on the natural beauty of the area.”

Wood’s comments have been echoed by Dr. Jeff Thompson, CEO of Gundersen Health System who said, “Land trusts focus on the health of the environment, and that is critical to the long term health of our communities....”

Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of New York’s Central Park, was one of the first people to suggest that parks or conservation areas could be paid for from increasing tax revenues that result from rising land values adjacent to the protected lands. In the ensuing 150 years since the design of Central Park, more than 30 studies have demonstrated a positive effect of creating nature preserves or park areas, including boosting overall property values. Municipalities often can generate more money in property taxes when there are good parks and nature preserves than when little or no such “green space” exists.

The positive economic effect of conservation areas on property values becomes readily apparent when we see real estate developers and realtors market housing lots next to nature preserves. Inevitably, advertisements for such lot sales tout the benefits of the conservation areas for the scenic beauty and outdoor recreational opportunities.

Attracting new and growing businesses is easier in communities possessing natural beauty and places for people to recreate outdoors. Businesses often select a location with a high quality of life in order to compete for the highly trained, in-demand workers.

According to a report by The Trust for Public Land, people used to believe that a decrease in environmental quality was one trade-off for economic growth, but in our modern economy, business leaders recognize that *a good environment is ranked as the most important amenity in attracting high-technology workers*—more than housing, cost of living, and good schools. This desirable trait has been termed “quality of place.”

Larry Kirch, Director of Planning for the City of La Crosse and the architect of a collaborative conservation program with a local land trust, explained, “The scenic beauty and the economy go hand in hand, and sometimes they get played off against each other. But I think more and more people are thinking it’s not an either-or situation—that you can have a great quality of life. You can have a cared-for natural environment. It is an economic driver. I think we pride ourselves on living in a beautiful area and protecting what we have here.”

John Crompton, a planning and open space researcher, asserts that “quality of life is not only important in relocation, expansion, or initiation decisions, it is also important in employee retention and has an economic bottom line. . . . If a community commits to a long-term, comprehensive plan to enhance the factors that it can control that positively influence the quality of life, it is likely to have an advantage over other places when recruiting and retaining business.”

Some may think that economic benefits of conservation, if they exist at all, must be immeasurably small. This line of thinking has been strongly contradicted by the data. For example, according to a report from The Trust for Public Land, economists determined that in 2007 the Philadelphia park system provided the city with revenue of \$23.3 million, municipal savings of \$16 million, resident savings of \$1.15 billion, and a collective increase of resident wealth of \$729 million. These figures included more than \$1.08 billion in what economists call “direct-use value” of parks, including sporting activities, walking, picnicking, and other park visitation. People like and benefit from “green space” and conserved areas in a major way.

It’s not merely urban-area parks and conservation that result in large economic benefits. A 2008 study by Trout Unlimited concluded that trout anglers alone annually contribute more than \$1 billion to the economy in the Driftless Area of the Upper Mississippi River Valley. If one added the economic impact of hunters and other types of anglers, the value undoubtedly would be several billion dollars each year.

Also, Conservation is a great money-saving alternative to sprawling development. Although a big surprise to most people, studies repeatedly have shown that residential development may cost communities more money than they stand to gain in real estate taxes and that conserving land may make more economic sense over the long term. This also was the conclusion of a study conducted by Karl Green, University of Wisconsin-Extension agent.

When it comes to issues of making choices about land use—choices that result in consequences felt for decades and centuries—it is critically important to think long term rather than focusing solely on immediate economic issues. If we exploit natural resources for a quick buck today, we might kill the “goose that lays the golden egg” and deprive ourselves and future generations of substantial economic and other benefits.

Conserving the beautiful forests, prairies, trout streams, marshes and other natural areas makes good business sense and helps provide a high quality of life. In today’s uncertain world, it is more important than ever to recognize the sound investment of land conservation that will continue to pay big dividends for generations to come.