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Study: Wisconsin State Park System provides key economic, cultural benefits

Economic impacts include 8,200 jobs and \$350 million in income for Wisconsin residents

Madison, Wis.—Wisconsin’s state parks, outdoor recreation areas, forests and trails serve as important drivers of local economic vitality according to a recent report. The report also found that the State Park System conserves important environmental resource areas that are public legacies.

“Economic Impacts of the Wisconsin State Park System: Connections to Gateway Communities” by Jeffrey Prey of the Wisconsin Dept. of Natural Resources and David Marcouiller of the University of Wisconsin-Extension/UW-Madison, looks at 69 outdoor recreation sites operated by the Wisconsin State Bureau of Parks and Recreation.

“The mechanisms that link state parks and trails to local economic impacts are not well understood,” says Marcouiller. “Our study addresses several key questions to improve the understanding of how state parks and trails affect local economic conditions.”

The researchers wanted to learn how state-owned properties differed in the recreational opportunities they offered; how different types of visitors spent their money in communities located near the sites; and how visitors contributed to local job creation and income generation.

“What we found is that each property and its nearby communities offered unique resources and opportunities for people to enjoy,” says Marcouiller.

The combined economic impacts of the Wisconsin State Park System total more than \$1 billion a year, Marcouiller says. “Wisconsin gets a significant return on its investment from the State Parks System. In addition to these market-based impacts, there is a huge amount of value embodied in protecting the state’s valuable ecosystems.”

Impacts from the Park System sites, located around the state, were categorized into eight regions based on the Wisconsin State Comprehensive Outdoor recreation Plan: the Great Northwest; the Northwoods; the Upper Lake Michigan Coastal; the Lake Winnebago Waters; the Western Sands; the Mississippi River Corridor; the Southern Gateways; and the Lower Lake Michigan Coastal.

Key findings included:

--The Wisconsin State Park System offers a wide variety of activities, such as hiking, camping, boating, skiing, bird watching, and all-terrain vehicle use that attracts different types of visitors.

--Visitors include day-trippers and overnight guests who come from many different locations. Understanding where visitors come from is important in identifying sources of new money flowing into gateway communities near state park properties.

--On average, individual state forest visitors spent almost \$41 per day while state trails visitors spend over \$90 per day.

--The vast majority of spending (nearly 70 percent) comes from visitors to state parks.

--Non-local visitor spending is estimated to exceed \$580 million, providing a significant economic stimulus to local private sector businesses.

--When combined, the local economic impacts of private sector stimulus in the State Park System regions accounted for over 8,200 jobs and \$350 million in income for Wisconsin residents.

--In recent years, the park system recorded an average level of 14 million visitor-days per year.

The results of the study have shown there is ample opportunity for further research that can shine a clearer spotlight on the impacts and importance of the Wisconsin State Park System, Marcouiller says.

“Economic Impacts of the Wisconsin State Park System: Connections to Gateway Communities” is available online at

<http://urpl.wisc.edu/people/marcouiller/publications/13EISPfinal.pdf>