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How Parks Employ More People Than Wal-Mart

<http://www.thedailygreen.com/print-this/environmental-news/latest/employment-parks-jobs-synd>

Parks jobs generate real money for the economy, but leaders rarely invest in this surprising source of employment during tough economic times.

Parks jobs provide real money for the economy, but preserving new parks is rarely the goal of leaders trying to boost employment.

Two New York Times articles published earlier this month illustrate the highs and lows of land protection right now. One, "Preservation Groups Find Bargains in Housing Bust," described how plummeting real estate prices have provided once-in-a-lifetime opportunities for land-conservation organizations to protect irreplaceable natural treasures once destined for sprawling development. From Idaho to Florida and Virginia to Oregon, groups have preserved fields and forests, marshland and ocean waterfronts that as little as a year ago were slated for massive housing projects. Many of these scenic wonders now will be turned into parks.

That's the high. The low, "New Year but No Relief for Strapped States," noted the challenges many state governments face to rein in skyrocketing deficits. Actually, the earlier article hinted at this dilemma's environmental implications: dedicated funds for protecting land and creating new parks already have been a casualty of fiscal belt-tightening in statehouses from Olympia to Albany – just when they could do the most good. With red ink continuing to rise, even more drastic cuts are likely. There's a trickle-down effect, too. With less state support, county and municipal governments are being forced to slash their own budgets, so land preservation and parks often take another hit on the local level.

Why are these initiatives such easy deficit-reduction targets? Because there's a presumption they are luxuries. Sure, parks make us feel good and wildflower-filled meadows are pretty to look at, but they don't pay the bills. That's the all-too-common perception among legislators and even the public at large. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth.

For proof, take a look at Conservation: An Investment That Pays, a study released last year by The Trust for Public Land. It's one of the most comprehensive looks yet at the myriad benefits land protection offers our cash-strapped economies.

The report compiles a wealth of statistics offering incontrovertible evidence that:

- * Parks increase surrounding property values and hence local revenues, while protected open space such as farms keep the costs of municipal services low. (Remember, cows don't go to school);

- * New parks spur economic development and boost nearby businesses, often providing the catalyst for downtown revitalization. This point was driven home forcefully in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., (headquarters of Scenic Hudson, the organization I head) with the October opening of Walkway Over the Hudson, which transformed a rusting railroad bridge into a dramatic park. In its first two months of operation, it attracted 400,000 visitors, while local restaurants have enjoyed a spike in business;

- * Those of us who live near parks are more likely to exercise, which helps us ward off medical conditions responsible for out-of-control health care costs;

* Preserved forests and fields naturally purify our air and water while conserved floodplains prevent property loss from natural disaster – all reducing the need for costly manmade protections;

* By enhancing our quality of life, parks and open space attract new jobs and residents. (A healthy local environment is among business executives' top concerns when looking for a place to relocate or set up shop.)

Parks aren't freeloaders. Far from it, they provide communities with direct economic benefits. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has calculated that Americans who engage in hunting, fishing and wildlife-watching spend nearly \$125 billion annually, supporting an industry responsible for 1.6 million jobs – more people than are employed by Walmart, the largest U.S. retailer. The National Parks Conservation Association reports that for each \$1 invested in our national parks, there's a \$4 return in local spending. In New York, figures are comparable for state parks; I bet the same holds for other states.

In many states, including New York, funds for land protection already have taken disproportionate cuts that fail to take into account these far-reaching economic and environmental benefits. It's imperative we let our legislators know they can't let the landscapes that enrich our lives – and, as it turns out, contribute so much to the bottom line – be the primary victims of future reductions. For in the end, it's us who wind up being the true victims.