American Hiking Society

The Economic Benefits of Trails

Hiking is one of America's fastest growing recreational activities. In the year 2000, almost one-third of Americans, that's 67 million people, went hiking.[1] The USDA Forest Service is predicting steep increases in participation in backpacking and hiking, including an 80 percent increase in hiking in the Southern and Pacific Coast areas, over the next 50 years. Hiking is often associated with backcountry recreation and camping, but as trail use grows and more trails are developed near population centers, communities are recognizing the economic, social and health benefits of trails and hiking.

"From small businesses centered around our recreation and tourism to science and technology jobs helping to restore our environment, we are beginning to see tangible economic development as a direct result of improved stewardship of our resources,"[2] said Speaker of the West Virginia House of Delegates.

An organized trail system is a desirable amenity and can contribute to the economical vitality of the community. A trail can guide both visitors and residents through diverse neighborhoods, past interesting shops, enticing restaurants, and many other businesses in downtown areas. Revenue generated from trail-related recreation and sports activities provide substantial income and employment opportunities.[3]

A GROWTH INDUSTRY

Hiking and outdoor recreation is a booming business. The leisure industry today, at $311 billion annually, is almost the size of Australia's gross national product. In 15 years, consumer spending on recreation and entertainment has increased from 6.5 percent of total consumer spending to 10.5. Since 1977, visitors to National Park units have increased by 30 percent. And in the seven years prior to 1994, the number of USDA Forest Service campsites grew by 9.2 percent to accommodate the burgeoning interest in hiking and camping. By the year 2050, the number of people backpacking is expected to increase 26 percent.[4]

COMMERCE AND JOBS

- In a study conducted in August, 2001, of the visitors to Rio Grande National Forest (52% of whom listed hiking as their primary activity), it was estimated that the amount of money each individual spent per visit within a 50 mile radius of the recreation site included $567.93 for lodging, $319.44 for food and drink, and $168.44 for transportation. It was also estimated that in a typical year, these visitors individually spend $3,805.92 on all outdoor recreation activities.[5]

- A May 2001 study of visitor impact in Blaine County, Idaho, near the Salmon River, indicated that the impact of visitor spending was the creation of 5,980 jobs and $120 million in income in the single county.[6]

- In 1998 outdoor enthusiasts contributed almost $132 million dollars while visiting the Everglades National Park, and helped to create over 5,000 new jobs.[7]

- After just one season, 61 businesses located along the 35-mile-long Missouri River State Trail reported that the trail was having a positive effect on their businesses. Eleven of the businesses reported that the Trail had strongly influenced their decision to establish their business, and 17 (28%) had increased the size of their investment since the Trail had opened.[8]

- During the federal government shutdown from December, 1995 to January, 1996, 400,000 visitors were turned away daily from all National Park System units, resulting in a total loss to local communities of nearly $14.2 million per day.[9]

Fact Sheet

- The Washington State Trails Plan estimated that trail users in the state of Washington have an estimated equipment investment of over $3.4 billion which generates tax revenues of $13.8 to $27.6 million.[10]

Although all the visitors to the trails just mentioned may not be hikers, well-managed trails running through communities can foster substantial, sustainable economic activity through business development and tourism. Trails encourage the establishment of "clean" industries and businesses such as cafes, bike shops, and bed & breakfasts in communities along the trail. Along the Baltimore and Annapolis Trail Park in Maryland, six trail-related stores have opened and two others have re-located next to the trail to attract new customers.[11]

In rural southwest Virginia, the small town of Damascus depends on its auspicious location at the junction of five major trails, including the America Discovery Trail, for substantial economic rewards. "In addition to the new businesses that have emerged, the entire area has profited from the thousands of visitors who come to hike and bike the trails."[12]

RETAIL VALUES

The manufacturing of hiking boots, tents, backpacks, sleeping bags and other related outdoor equipment has become a major job-creating industry. The Outdoor Industry Association estimates that total current sales of outdoor products and specialty items is $10 billion.[13] In Los Angeles County alone, hiking enthusiasts support a $300 million hiking equipment industry. In the year 2000, sales of hiking boots in the United States totaled over $213 million, and the sales of backpacks totaled over $284 million.[14] In 1995, tent sales reached $78 million and sleeping bag sales exceeded $86 million at the wholesale level according to the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association. As the interest in hiking increases, so will the sales of recreational equipment.

PROPERTY APPRECIATION

Trails are becoming common in residential neighborhoods. Development plans for homes, apartments, and townhouses often include footpaths to enhance recreational opportunities *and* property values. Urban trails are regarded by real estate agents as an amenity that helps to attract buyers and to sell property. Trails are considered lifestyle enhancements and are usually included in the sales package for a property.[15]

In a survey of metro-Denver real estate agents, 73 percent of the agents believed a home near a trail would be easier to sell. A survey of homeowners living adjacent to a trail showed 29 percent felt their property value would increase and 57 percent felt their home would sell more quickly because of the trailside location. Furthermore, 29 percent were influenced by the proximity of a trail in buying their home, and 17 percent of renters were influenced by the presence of a trail.[16]

Studies in other regions have substantiated the Denver findings. For example, Seattle's Burke-Gilman Trail has increased the value of homes near the trail by 6.5 percent.[17] In another study of two rail-trails in Minnesota, 87 percent of landowners surveyed believed the trails had no negative impact on the value of their property.[18]

A survey of property values near greenbelts in Boulder, Colorado, noted that housing prices declined an average of $4.20 for each foot of distance away from a greenbelt for up to two-thirds of a mile. In one neighborhood, this figure was $10.20 per foot. The same study concluded that the average value of a home adjacent to the greenbelt would be 32 percent higher than the same property 3,200 feet from the greenbelt.[19]

TRAFFIC CONGESTION RELIEF

Americans spend tens of millions of dollars purchasing, operating and maintaining automobiles. Road and highway building and maintenance, oil production, and environmental damage add to the tab. The average car costs about $3,000 per year to operate plus up to $2000 a year on gasoline.[20] Yet studies indicate that 50 percent of all car excursions are less than three miles, a distance that could easily be walked or biked.[21] Residents of La Canada Flintridge, California, use trails to commute to their jobs at the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory, reducing commuter costs and improving air quality.[22] By using neighborhood trails for transportation, these commuters are saving between five to 22 cents per automobile mile. Using human-powered transportation could result in a savings of 17.9 billion motor vehicle miles, seven billion gallons of gas and 9.5 million tons of exhaust emissions annually.[23]

LOW-COST HEALTH CARE

Studies show that walking or hiking a few times per week can improve a person's health and lower health care costs. A National Park Service study compared people who lead sedentary lifestyles to those who exercise regularly. The exercisers filed 14 percent fewer healthcare claims, spent 30 percent fewer days in the hospital, and had 41 percent fewer claims greater than $5,000.[24] For example, 1.5 million fractures each year associated with osteoporosis result in $6 billion in medical care costs. Through exercise such as hiking, bones actually gain mass, slowing the process of osteoporosis, which in turn could lead to fewer fractures and much lower medical costs.[25] The anticipated national benefits of increased participation in physical fitness include reductions in both the direct and indirect costs of illness and disease, improvement in lifestyle, and a reduction in geriatric costs.[26]

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[3] Barthlow, Kelly, Moore, Roger, *The Economic Impacts and Uses of Long-Distance Trails*, The National Park Service, 1998, p 49.
[4]English, Donald, et al., *Regional Demand and Supply Projection for Outdoor Recreation*, USDA Forest Service, Southeastern Forest Experiment Station, G.A., June 2000.
[5] National Visitor Use Monitoring Project, Rio Grande National Forest, August 20, 2001.
[6] Dean Runyon Associates. *Economic Analysis of Blaine County*, May 2001.
[7] Business for Wilderness, *The Bottom Line: Protecting the Value of America's Public Lands*, 2001, p 5.
[8] Barthlow, Moore, p 49.
[9]Moore, Roger L., *The Economic Impacts of Long-Distance Trails: A Review of Related Literature*, Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management, North Carolina State University, May, 1996, p 33.
[10]Barthlow, Moore, p 49.
[11]Greenways Incorporated, *Transportation Potential and Other Benefits of Off-Road Bicycle and Pedestrian Facilities (for FHWA)*, Washington, D.C., 1992, p 17.
[12]Damascus, Virginia *Trail Town* nomination, submitted to American Hiking Society, March 11, 1996.
[13]Widdeking, Lisa, *Human Powered Outdoor Recreation, State of the Industry Report*, The Outdoor Recreation Coalition of America and the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association's Outdoor Products Council, 1995, p 8.
[14] Outdoor Industry Association, *Retail Audit Top-Line Report*, http://www.outdoorindustry.org, 2000.
[15] Barthlow, Moore, p 58.
[16]The Conservation Fund and Colorado State Parks State Trails Program, *The Effect of Greenways on Property Values and Public Safety*, Colorado, 1995, p 6-7.
[17]Greenways Incorporated, p 21.
[18]Moore, Roger, p 33.
[19]Ibid. p 21.
[20]Public Broadcasting Systems, *Green Machines.* That Money Show, http://www.pbs.org/wnet/moneyshow/cover/020201.html, June 8, 2001.
[21]National Bicycle and Pedestrian Clearinghouse. *Technical Assistance Series, Number 2: The Economic and Social Benefits of Off-Road Bicycle and Pedestrian Facilities*, Washington, DC, 1995, p. 3.
[22]La Canada Flintridge *Trail Town* nomination submitted to American Hiking Society, March, 1996.
[23]National Bicycle and Pedestrian Clearinghouse, p. 3.
[24]Greenways Incorporated, p. 14.
[25]Burke, Edmund R., Ph.D. *Benefits of Bicycling and Walking to Health (for FHWA)*, Washington, DC, 1992, p. 13.
[26]Ibid., p. 16.

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