

Nature Economy

The Economic Benefits of Trails

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Fact Sheet #1

December 2018

Nature Economy: An Overview

New Hampshire's natural resources are some of the state's greatest assets. Our New Hampshire economy grows when our forests, trails, waters, are well taken care of, used by residents and visitors and linked to our downtowns. More than 80 community-visioning processes conducted by UNH Cooperative Extension in New Hampshire over the past 20 years identified that over half of all towns indicated that they're not leveraging their trails and natural amenities to foster vibrant communities. In response, many communities have formed volunteer trail committees, and are making efforts to map and publicize their trails. The following fact sheet is the first in a series about the nature economy. In this one we share an overview on the economic benefits of trails.



Trails and natural spaces provide us with many benefits and services. Some of which are quantifiable (such as spending on recreation) and others, such as water purification and flood control as well as cultural and spiritual benefits, are less easily quantified but nonetheless important. These “ecosystem services,” are essentially benefits humans receive from nature, and contribute to community well being and quality of life. As shown above, there are many aspects of nature that contribute to economic well being and quality of life. In this fact sheet we focus on the recreation and tourism benefits trails can provide.

The Outdoor Industry Association (2017) reports the following economic impact of the outdoor recreation economy in the U.S.



Accounts for \$887 billion in annual U.S. consumer spending



Supports nearly 7.6 million jobs across the U.S.



Generates \$124.5 billion in annual federal, state and local tax revenue



Adds \$524.8 billion in active outdoor recreation trip and travel



According to U.S. Department of Commerce's Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), the outdoor recreation economy grew 3.8 percent in 2016 in comparison to the overall U.S. economy's 2.8 percent growth. BEA estimates that outdoor recreation accounted for 2 percent of the overall U.S. Gross Domestic Product in 2016, contributing \$373.7 billion to the economy (BEA, 2018).

Vermont's Recreation Economy: A Case Study

Regionally, in the state of Vermont, a recent study of the Mad River Valley emphasized the importance of trail tourism, specifically in terms of mountain biking (SE Group, 2014). Further, the Vermont Trails and Greenways Council (2016) examined four trail networks in the state, estimating that these networks alone generated nearly \$30 million in economic impact from out-of-state visitors. Trail tourism is particularly beneficial for economic impact when it attracts non-local visitors. Kingdom Trails, one of the four trail networks examined in the Vermont Trails and Greenways study, is a prime example of destination trail tourism. Local trail users and non-local visitors alike visit businesses including restaurants, breweries, coffee shops, ice cream shops, etc. and non-local visitors further support the economy through use of overnight accommodations.



Trails Drive Local Economies in NH

The NH Bureau of Trails includes more than 1,200 miles of wheeled OHRV trails, over 300 miles of state owned rail trails, and over 7,000 miles of snowmobile trails (NH Trails Bureau, 2018). Further, volunteer organizations manage more than 4,000 miles of hiking trails in the state (NH State Parks, 2018). Special interest organizations also have their own estimates of certain types of trails, for example the Rails to Trails Conservancy reports that NH currently has 75 total rail trails which encompass 558 miles (Rails to Trails Conservancy, 2018).

In-Town Trails

Beyond recreation benefits, research has shown that homes near trails also command higher property values; the presence of trails can attract new residents to move to or stay in a location; and trails also encourage physical fitness. Trails that are located closer to towns can be used as alternative forms of transportation. In-Town Trails, such as historic pathways, walking tours, riverwalks, and community trails have great potential for connecting with and enhancing economic activity in Main Street businesses because they are more easily accessible for a greater diversity of community members.

Bicycle Trails

There are many studies that show the economic impact of cycling and cycling infrastructure, such as bike paths and rail trails. Studies have found that:

- People who ride bikes make purchases when they are out riding and are more likely to make multiple or repeat trips to local stores
- Bicycling tourism brings millions of dollars to cities and towns across the country
- Bike accessible business districts benefit from catering to cyclists as customers

(League of American Bicyclists)



Strengthening Economy Through Nature

UNH Extension's Community & Economic Development Team aims to help communities connect natural assets with community goals to create vibrant economies and high quality of life for all. This can be in the form of assisting communities in identifying and utilizing their natural capital, such as connecting their downtowns with trails and leveraging green infrastructure to reduce or maintain costs of community services.

For more Nature Economy news and programs, please visit:

<https://extension.unh.edu/programs/nature-economy>

Sources & Resources

[National Recreation Economic Impact Data](#)

[NH Trails Bureau](#)

[Headwaters Economics Trail Study Database](#)

[Rails to Trails Conservancy](#)



For more information on our programming and technical assistance in this area, please contact Shannon Rogers, Nature Based Economic Development Specialist
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