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Potsdam-based Clarkson University study shows Adirondack Park forest preserve is economic asset for surrounding communities

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POTSDAM -- A new study conducted by Clarkson University shows that the Adirondack Park's constitutionally protected Forest Preserve is an economic asset to the private lands and communities near it, and the wildest of those lands return the greatest financial benefit.

Clarkson's study showed that people seeking to purchase homes and businesses in northern New York paid more for the same property inside the Adirondack Park than they would have outside of it. Buyers paid up to 25 percent more if that property was close to a wilderness area.

New York's Adirondack Park Wilderness areas, where motorized recreation is not allowed, constitute the largest protected Wilderness in the Northeast.

"In general, results confirm that private properties inside the Adirondack Park, all else equal, have higher values than those outside the blue line," says the study led by Clarkson School of Business Assoc. Prof. Martin D. Heintzelman. "The results also suggest that proximity to protected land positively impacts property values. Specifically, we find that properties within 0.5 to 6 miles of wilderness are valued at up to a 25-percent premium."

The study analyzed more than 77,000 real estate transactions over a decade in the 12 counties that comprise the Adirondack Park, using proven statistical models and Geographic Information System mapping technology to assist in the analysis. The study also cites other research efforts that found similar economic benefits derived from wilderness protection, both in the Adirondacks and elsewhere.

The boost in property values for lands near wilderness areas was found to be statistically similar to the difference between homes situated on waterfront, which are worth an average of 27 percent more than similar homes located away from the shore, the study noted.

"Overall, our results suggest that wilderness land has significant positive impacts on nearby property values...this result is reasonable since allowing motorized vehicle use in (other lands) may destroy wildlife habitat, degrade the region's bio-integrity...and produce undesirable effects like noise and pollution," the study said.

Higher Property Value an Indication of Economic Boost

"This result may indicate more economic activity in a local region, and surely points to increased amenity values for nearby landowners," the report said. "These results do not mean that, in order

to maximize property values, all public lands should be designated as wilderness, but that, at the margin, additional wilderness areas are likely to increase local property values. Economic theory suggests that as the amount of wilderness increases, each additional acre of wilderness will become less valuable than the last. Nonetheless, at current levels, the marginal value of additional wilderness is still positive.”

Wilderness areas make up less than 20 percent of the Adirondack Park’s six million acres. The park is roughly half public and half private land, with 130 rural villages and hamlets, but no cities. The Adirondack Park’s Wilderness Areas are rare. They account for more than 70 percent of all Wilderness areas in the northeastern United States.

Buyers Come from Everywhere, Out of State Buyers Pay Even More

“...Non-NY buyers pay more than 100 percent more for properties in the park than outside of the park ... More importantly, non-NY buyers also pay a much higher premium for properties close to wilderness land, compared with NY buyers,” the study said. “Specifically, non-NY buyers pay approximately 3 times more for properties that are within 0.5 miles to 3 miles of wilderness lands.”

People Voting with Their Check Books

“There is no better indicator of economic value of something than the price people are willing to pay to be near it,” said William C. Janeway, Executive Director of the Adirondack Council. “The study shows the positive economic impact of wilderness on Adirondack communities as people pay much more for a home or business near an Adirondack Park Wilderness Area than they will pay for homes or businesses near less protected public land.”

“This study shows the governor was right to classify the Hudson Gorge as a new Wilderness Area and should do the same with the newly acquired Boreas Ponds tract,” said Neil Woodworth, Executive Director of the Adirondack Mountain Club. “It is right next to the High Peaks Wilderness Area and would make an outstanding addition.”

The Clarkson study also confirms the findings of a recent tourism study of Essex County in the Adirondack Park, which found most visitors spent their time and money on non-motorized recreation.

The 9,300-square-mile Adirondack Park is the largest park in the contiguous United States. It is a preserve of public and private lands, with 130 rural communities situated alongside the largest wilderness areas in the Northeast.

The State of New York now owns roughly 35,000 acres of Forest Preserve adjacent to the High Peaks Wilderness Area and Dix Mountain Wilderness Area. These state lands are awaiting a classification recommendation from the Adirondack Park Agency.

A coalition of conservation organizations has called on Gov. Cuomo to classify the most sensitive of these lands as wilderness. However, a group of local government officials is seeking the governor's approval of expanded motorized and/or mechanized recreation.

"This report is an exciting confirmation that sends a clear message through the Adirondack Park, all the way to Albany," said William C. Cooke, Director of Government Relations for Citizens Campaign for the Environment. "For generations, people have been gravely concerned that banning development and logging on public lands inside the Adirondack Park would dampen local economic growth to the detriment of the Park's residents. Everyone who cares about the environment and the people of the Adirondacks can be reassured. That simply isn't true."

"Audubon knows that protecting birds and critical bird habitat in the Adirondacks is good for nature and good for generating real and positive economic impact for communities," said Erin Crotty, Executive Director of Audubon New York. "Clarkson's study confirms the positive impact of Wilderness on the local economy."

"This scientific study shows that with Wilderness Areas, you truly can have it both ways: the strongest environmental protections also lead to the greatest economic benefit for the local communities," said Marcia Bystryn, President of the New York League of Conservation Voters. "Such findings should weigh heavily on the minds of government officials as we decide how to best protect Boreas Pond and other areas moving forward."

Constitutional Protection for Forest Preserve

Since 1895, all public forests inside the Adirondack Park are Adirondack Forest Preserve and are protected by the "forever wild" clause of the NYS Constitution. Adirondack Forest Preserve lands classified as Wilderness areas are further protected by prohibitions against motorized or mechanized recreation and access (except for people with disabilities). Hiking, climbing, paddling, sailing, hunting, fishing and camping are allowed on all Forest Preserve.

"The lesson here is that the greatest economic value of these lands is not from opening them to automobiles, snowmobiles, or other motorized recreation," said Peter Iwanowicz, Executive Director of Environmental Advocates of New York. "All Forest Preserve is valuable. Wilderness areas are by far the most valuable of all Forest Preserve to the local economy."

"This study makes a lot of sense when you think about simple concepts like supply and demand," said Richard Schrader, New York Political and Legislative Director, the Natural Resources Defense Council. "Quiet, unspoiled forests, scenic beauty and solitude are getting harder and harder to find globally and more and more valuable. Here's a place where those wild characteristics are on full display."

Less Protected Lands Have Less Positive Economic Impact

The report also makes an essential distinction for the Adirondack Park Agency to consider when it is classifying new Forest Preserve lands. It found that lands where visitors were allowed to

drive their vehicles, snowmobiles, or seaplanes didn't have the significant positive economic impact of Wilderness in terms of impact on local property values.

State Forest Preserve lands classified as Wild Forest are permitted to contain roads and bridges, parking lots and mountain bike trails. By offering a wider variety of recreational options, they complement Wilderness by diversifying the available recreational opportunities park-wide.

“We do not find a significant impact on property values adjacent to Wild Forest lands,” the Clarkson study notes in its conclusions.

Dr. Heintzelman was assisted in the study by Ph.D. Candidate Chuan Tang of the Clarkson Institute for a Sustainable Environment.

Visitors Prefer Wilderness Too

Other recent studies confirm that people buying homes and businesses were not alone in preferring Wilderness Areas to Wild Forest. Visitors prefer non-motorized recreation too. The findings of the Clarkson study correlate well with the 2014 Leisure Travel Study: Essex County, New York conducted by the Regional Office of Sustainable Tourism.

That report showed that 74 percent of respondents were attracted to visit the area by outdoor activities, and of that, 85.5 percent selected hiking, 55.7 percent selected paddling a canoe or kayak and 36 percent selected fishing as a key attraction to visit.

In contrast, only 7.7 percent said that snowmobiling was a key draw for their visit. While 18 percent said they came for bicycling, the study didn't differentiate between mountain biking on Wild Forest trails, or cycling in communities and on paved highways.