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What is the economic impact of wilderness?

[Martha Foley](#)

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Two moose caught on a motion-sensitive trail camera on the Boreas Ponds tract. Archive Photo of the Day: Connie Prickett

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May 31, 2016 — How should the newly-acquired Boreas Ponds tract in Essex County be managed? Should it be wilderness? Should it be classified with a less restrictive set of rules that allow things like mountain bikes and snowmobiles?

In the past, some tourism experts, including former Hamilton County Tourism Director Ann Melious, have discounted the economic value of lands classified as wilderness. "I can state as fact that wilderness has not helped economic development in Hamilton County," Melious said.

To help frame this conversation, the Adirondack Council, a green group, commissioned [a new study from Clarkson University](#). They hoped to measure the actual economic impact of wilderness. Researchers found that people were willing to pay up to 25 percent more for property that sits near a wilderness area. Martha Foley talked about those findings with John Sheehan, spokesman for the Adirondack Council.

Martha Foley: What's the central nut of what this tells us?

John Sheehan: We, for decades, have believed that it was a good idea for the state to designate new public lands that are very sensitive as wilderness for ecological reasons, but we also believed that it was economically an advantage to communities in the Adirondacks because there's so little wilderness anywhere else. The only two areas of significant wilderness protection in the eastern United States are the Florida Everglades and the Adirondack Park. We asked Clarkson to take a look at what the impact of wilderness had been on peoples' willingness to pay for property in the Adirondacks, and what they found was that wilderness was by far the most attractive place for people to be near, whether it was a business or a home. They were willing to pay 25 percent more than they would for similar property that was not near a wilderness area.

MF: So is the argument that that is a measure of the economic benefit of proximity of wilderness? We're not talking about less restrictive land classifications; this is the true wilderness.

JS: Wilderness being an area where you're not allowed to drive a motor vehicle or a mechanized vehicle of any kind and where the predominant forces are nature.

MF: So it's great, when we're talking about property values, but what does it indicate about other factors in the park? It's not that the Adirondacks has not attracted ritzy homes and high-value property, or people who are willing to pay for high-value property. It's that steady jobs are missing, and retail, and there are no volunteers for the fire department; so how does this factor?

JS: Those things tend to get better as the economy improves and as people are willing to move into an area. The prices go up for housing and that sort of thing. If we were to compare Keene Valley to other places, Keene's probably an excellent example in this case. Except for the entrance to the High Peaks Wilderness, it does not have another significant amenity in the community other for a river running through it, which is very common in the Adirondacks. But it does not have snowmobiling in the wintertime; there are no significant trails for the community. They have made their success on the back of being the easiest way to get to the High Peaks Wilderness Area. It's our hope that as wilderness expands in the High Peaks region, for example, that we would see North Hudson and Newcomb reap the same benefits.

MF: So let's look at Hamilton County on the other hand. A lot of wilderness, lot's of high-value second homes, almost no cash economy, very little community left there, the schools are really shrinking and stressed, and when I mentioned fire departments, it's hard to get volunteers for the fire department in Blue Mountain Lake anymore. And this has been a decline that we've witnessed in just the past few decades.

JS: Well, it's not uncommon throughout the Northeast for this to be happening right now. What we're seeing is, inside the park, the economic indicators are better than they would be in other rural places.

MF: But how does that help the local communities? If you have another billionaire come in and buy a big old park that was once owned by billionaires or multi-millionaires, how does that help Tupper Lake? How does that help the local guy who now may be priced out of property that he wants to buy?

JS: In Keene and places where it has happened recently, I think what we saw is that the economy grew slowly from Main Street outward and that having a few people willing to come into the community and buy even a high-value property encouraged others to do the same, and that they had the opportunity at that point to start building a nexus of businesses like the Noon Mark Diner, like the locally-owned hardware store in town, the market, Spruce Hill Lodge. You've got places that people come from a long way off to go to, before they go into to the wilderness area, and start to build a, as Tupper is trying to do right now, a downtown that will provide the kind of amenities that people want as they're visiting a natural area. But not everybody in the family, for example, wants to spend all day in the wilderness or spend two weeks in the wilderness. They may want to come, be near it, paddle into it for a few hours, and then stay at a hotel, go see a movie that night, have dinner downtown. I think a lot of it is based on tourism, and it's going to continue to be.