



The Dividends of Coastal Conservation in the United States

An Economic Analysis of Coastal and Ocean Parks

By Shiva Polefka and Billy DeMaio

August 2016

Introduction and summary

In his 2015 Earth Day speech at Everglades National Park, President Barack Obama hailed America's national parks, proclaiming, "We are blessed with the most beautiful God-given landscape in the world."¹ He is not the only one who feels this way.

In 2015, more than 1 million people visited the Everglades National Park to enjoy its mangrove forests, sawgrass prairies, and extraordinary wildlife.² Located on the southern tip of Florida, it is just one of hundreds of coastal and marine parks, wildlife refuges, and marine sanctuaries in the United States. All of these places were designated to preserve America's publicly owned natural and cultural treasures, both along its shores and under its seas and Great Lakes. Not only do these jewels of American natural and cultural heritage hold immeasurable intrinsic value, but they also provide bountiful economic benefits to their surrounding communities and to the U.S. economy as a whole. The 1.08 million visitors to Everglades National Park in 2015 spent more than \$103 million in nearby communities, helping sustain 1,521 jobs and diversify the economies of the surrounding counties.³

Most Americans and visitors to the United States know the pull of the coast when it comes time to recharge, relax, seek peace, or play. A landmark study by the Outdoor Industry Association found that nationwide direct spending on outdoor recreation and tourism in the United States totaled \$646 billion in 2012, and coastal and Great Lakes states took in the lion's share of this spending, absorbing \$511.9 billion.⁴ Beach and harbor towns from Maine to Michigan to Maui thrive by accommodating the commonly shared desire for recreation in unspoiled coastal lands and along the shores of clean bodies of water.

However, there have been few systematic quantifications of the economic benefits that coastal communities derive from publicly accessible, protected coastal lands. Studies often bundle the nation's public beaches, reefs, and coastal trails with the rest of America's equally important national parks or analyze them in the context of the broader outdoor recreation economy.

On the cusp of the National Park Service's, or NPS's, second century, therefore, the conservation of special coastal and marine places—and public access to them—deserves special attention. The United States' thin fringe of coastal counties is home to more than 40 percent of the population but just 22 percent of its national park units.⁵ The National Marine Sanctuary System, the signature federal program that protects and promotes the nation's ecological treasures and cultural maritime heritage offshore, has just 15 sites under its jurisdiction; the National Park Service, meanwhile, has 59 national parks under its purview and oversees 412 units in total.⁶ Expanding existing coastal and offshore parks—and designating more of them—represents a key opportunity in the century ahead to ensure that federal systems for protecting special places serve Americans where they live. More coastal parks would also help ensure that public conservation efforts are successfully protecting extraordinary resources across all U.S. terrestrial and maritime territory.

This report helps illuminate the opportunities for accelerating coastal and ocean conservation and the diverse and significant benefits associated with doing so. First, it describes the different types of coastal protected areas in the United States. It then presents a new analytical synthesis of visitation and corresponding economic impact data from the National Park Service; the U.S. Department of the Interior, or DOI; and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, or NOAA, to illuminate the social and economic benefits that the conservation of special coastal places provides. Finally, the report offers recommendations for policymakers to harness the economic power of coastal parks, improve and expand coastal protected areas, and ensure equitable enjoyment of these American assets for generations to come.

Overview of analytical synthesis

The analysis estimates how coastal and ocean parks perform in visitation and local economic impact compared with their inland counterparts by parsing the relevant data for coastal park units from that of the National Park System as a whole. The analysis reveals that despite comprising a small portion of the United States' overall system of protected places, America's coastal and ocean parks appear to punch well above their weight in visitation and economic impact per site. Specifically, coastal park units within the National Park System drive nearly 30 percent of the system's total recreational visits, its spending impacts within nearby communities,

and also its overall economic impact, despite comprising just 22 percent of the system's total number of park units. In addition, the median figures for recreational visitation, visitor spending, jobs created, and economic output for coastal parks all significantly exceed the median for noncoastal park units (see Tables 1 and 2 on page 12 for complete findings).

The results indicate that coastal and ocean parks are high-performing economic assets for the surrounding communities and states—assets that serve as infrastructure to sustain high levels of employment and economic output, whether at urban beaches or in remote wilderness. Yet coastal and ocean parks provide benefits beyond the direct economic impacts of visitor spending. These protected areas are often the most accessible outdoor recreation opportunity for the 42 percent of Americans that live in the nation's coastal counties, including its large coastal cities.⁷ Accordingly, coastal parks play an essential role in ensuring fair and equitable fulfillment of the statutory mandates of the National Park Service and the National Marine Sanctuary System: to conserve extraordinary natural and cultural resources for the enjoyment of all Americans today and for the generations to come.⁸

In addition, growing evidence shows that the habitats and ecosystems protected within coastal and marine parks provide many additional valuable services to coastal economies and society as a whole, including sustaining fish and wildlife populations; protecting lives, property, and communities from the impacts of storms and floods; and sequestering carbon dioxide and water pollutants.

America's conserved coastal lands and ocean areas represent a central pillar of the recreation and tourism industries. They are essential to a sustainable Blue Economy in which prosperity and equitable economic growth are linked to the health of U.S. coastal and marine ecosystems and should therefore be celebrated and protected.

Our Mission

The Center for American Progress is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.

Our Values

As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

Our Approach

We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

