

Conserved Land in Maine Has Growing Economic Power

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Across Maine, conservation is often considered in the context of its environmental and social benefits: protecting wildlife, safeguarding clean air and water, preserving working lands and waterfronts and providing access to outdoor recreation, to name a few. Increasingly, however, conservation is also being evaluated through an economic lens.

Recent studies have helped put numbers to these benefits, offering a clearer picture of how conserving land supports communities in both urban and rural Maine.

Greater Portland is home to 100 miles of interconnected trails maintained by [Portland Trails](#), a nonprofit urban trails trust. These trails function as greenways, commuter routes, recreational spaces, wildlife corridors and social gathering places. They connect neighborhoods to schools, jobs and waterfronts, while preserving pockets of nature within a growing city.

A recent [economic and community contribution analysis](#), conducted by Camoin Associates and commissioned by Portland Trails, reveals just how much value this trail network delivers. Each year, trail-related activity supports over 900 jobs and generates over \$42 million in worker earnings, as well as nearly \$113 million in sales in Greater Portland alone. When accounting for ripple effects across the state, these numbers increase to over 1,200 jobs, \$54 million in worker earnings and nearly \$142 million in total sales in Maine annually.

The benefits extend even further. Economists estimate that the ecosystem services provided by land along the Portland Trails network, such as stormwater absorption, carbon sequestration and air filtration, may be worth between \$2 million and \$5 million annually. While those figures are approximate, they underscore a simple truth: Natural systems provide services that would be expensive, if not impossible, to replace with built infrastructure.

In Downeast Maine, the economic story plays out on a much larger and more varied landscape. In Hancock and Washington counties, more than 700,000 acres are conserved — representing nearly 20% of the region.

A [recent economic analysis](#) conducted by the [Downeast Conservation Network](#), in partnership with researchers at the University of Maine, found that these conserved lands generate hundreds of millions of dollars in annual benefits to the Downeast region. Outdoor recreation contributes nearly \$58 million annually, while forests sequester carbon worth an estimated \$42 million per year in climate benefits. Timber and blueberry harvesting on conserved lands generate more than \$20 million annually, and clean water protection provides nearly \$17 million in benefits each year. The study also identified that visitor spending tied to Acadia National Park exceeded \$300 million per year.

Yet, when Downeast Conservation Network brought the study's findings to local town officials and residents, the response was mixed. In rural communities struggling to fund schools, roads and emergency services — often with property taxes as the primary revenue source — large, eye-catching benefit figures did not fully reflect local realities, especially in communities outside of Acadia's influence.

Downeast conservation groups leaned into these concerns by inviting local select board members, town managers and other volunteers to collaboratively develop a follow-up analysis with the University of Maine that examined whether higher levels of conserved land correlated with increased property taxes. Statewide, the answer was yes, but only modestly so. On average, a 1% increase in conserved land resulted in a less than \$1 increase in the average annual property tax bill.

The results varied by region and town. In some communities, including towns with lower incomes or higher unemployment, conservation was actually associated with decreases in mill rates, while towns with greater percentages of land area in protection already (20%+) were associated with small increases in mill rates. Overall, the study considered many factors and illustrated a complex picture of rural town economies and encouraged conservation organizations to be thoughtful about where and how conservation is done to ensure it can contribute to economic vitality at a local level.

Another important finding from the analysis was that public support for conservation remains strong. Nearly three-quarters of survey respondents statewide favored expanding conservation in their communities, and 70% believed it improves ecological and human health.

Conservation works best when it is integrated thoughtfully into broader community planning. Across Maine, conservation organizations are increasingly collaborating with

municipalities, landowners, developers, state and federal agencies and tribal entities to ensure that conserved land supports local priorities — from maintaining access to working waterfronts, managed forests and agricultural landscapes, to expanding outdoor recreation opportunities, strengthening climate resilience and protecting culturally significant sites.

Putting an economic value on nature will never capture everything these places mean to people in Maine. But as Maine faces growing pressures from development, climate change and infrastructure needs, understanding the economic benefits of conservation helps inform smart, forward-looking decisions.

Maine's economy has always been tied to its water and landscapes. The best investments we can make are those that keep the landscapes, and the communities they support, thriving for the long term.

Read the original article on CentralMaine.com:

https://www.centralmaine.com/2026/02/26/conserved-land-in-maine-has-growing-economic-power-nature-connects/?state=OY5oCYMvpIH4NMGs62PmuCuttR00Sw2DdlgAui_cUU