

WORLD NATIONAL PARKS RECEIVE 8 BILLION VISITORS ANNUALLY



The world's national parks and reserves receive 8,000 million visitors a year, according to the first comprehensive study of nature tourism in protected areas. The study was conducted by researchers at Cambridge, Princeton, New Jersey and Washington Universities and published in PLOS Biology.

The researchers say that this number of visits could generate up to \$600 billion (€527.824 billion) in tourist spending per year, which is a great economic benefit far exceeding the less than \$10 billion (€8.797 billion) invested in protecting these sites each year.

Conservation scientists and experts describe the current global expenditure on protected areas as "totally inadequate" and have called for greater investment in the maintenance and expansion of protected areas.

"It is great that people are visiting protected areas so frequently and are getting so much out of the wilderness experience. Of course it is important to people and it is something we should celebrate," says lead researcher Professor Andrew Balmford of the Department of Zoology, University of Cambridge in the UK.

"These areas of the world provide us with incalculable benefits: from global climate stabilization and water flow regulation to the protection of countless species. We have now shown that nature reserves tourism will make a great contribution to the global economy. However, many of these reserves are being degraded by encroachment and illegal harvesting, and some are being lost completely. It is time for governments to make adequate investment in protected areas," he declared.

Dr. Andrea Manica, also from Cambridge, said that these are rough estimates based on limited data, so researchers have been careful not to exaggerate. "These are conservative estimates. The visitor levels tend to be higher than the 8 billion a year and there is no doubt that we are talking about hundreds of billions of dollars coming from tourism annually," she noted.

"We are looking at what people get from nature, the so-called 'ecosystem services.' Although some ecosystem services are difficult to measure, such as cultural or religious benefits, we believe nature-based recreation would be manageable. There is a market and tangible visitors that can be counted," she added.

"But when we started researching we found that so far no one had put all the data together. So we got to work. After a few months we built a database for creating our models. It is limited, but it is the best there is at this time," Balmford asserted.

The database consists of numbers of visits to 550 sites worldwide, which were then used to create equations that could predict visitor levels to more than 140,000 protected areas according to their size, distance, national income and so on.

Nature tourism expert and team member Matt Walpole from the World Conservation Monitoring

Center of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) believes that their **conservative estimate of 8 billion visitors a year is a "staggering figure that illustrates the value that people find in enjoying nature."**

Visitor levels were highest in North America, where protected areas receive a combined total of over 3 billion visits per year and lowest in Africa, where many countries have fewer than 100,000 annual visits to protected areas.

The Golden Gate National Recreation Area near San Francisco, California in the United States, had the highest visitor levels recorded in the database, with an average of 13.7 million visits, followed closely by the UK's Lake District and Peak District National Parks, with 10.5 million and 10.1 million respectively. In contrast, Tanzania's Serengeti National Park registered an annual average rate of 148,000 visits during the research period.

Research team member Jonathan Green, based at Cambridge, points out that it is far from just being exotic locations and large national parks that contributes to the value of visits to protected areas. "For many people, it is the nature reserve on their doorstep where they walk the dog every Sunday." Fowlmere Nature Reserve, a few kilometers south of Cambridge University, receives an average of almost 23,000 visitors a year.

By combining regional internet search rates with specific regional averages for visitor spending, especially on the cost of tickets, transportation and accommodation, the researchers were able to obtain the most complete picture to date of the global economic importance of visits to protected areas.

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