

# New research suggests living near protected areas can have positive impacts on human well-being

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Tourists in Namib-Naukluft National Park, Namibia. Credit: Robin Naidoo

Living near a protected area can improve aspects of human well-being across the developing world, new research published today in *Science Advances* suggests.

Protected areas are defined geographic spaces such as [national parks](#), nature reserves or [wilderness areas](#) that are managed with the goal of long-term conservation. They are one of the chief tools used to conserve biodiversity around the world.

But questions remain about how the establishment of [protected areas](#) affects the residents who live nearby and rely on the resources found in the newly protected space, said Drew Gerkey, an environmental anthropologist at Oregon State University and a co-author of the paper.

"Although people living near a protected area may benefit from long-term conservation, studies have also shown that protected areas sometimes deny people access to resources they depend on," said Gerkey, an assistant professor of anthropology in OSU's College of Liberal Arts. "Our study examines this dilemma at a global scale and suggests these protected areas have overall positive impacts on the people living nearby, under certain kinds of conditions."

Some protected areas are essentially off-limits to local people while others are multiple-use protected areas that permit limited harvests of natural resources. The study showed that those residents who stood to benefit most from their proximity to a protected area were those who lived near the multiple-use areas, Gerkey said.

Similarly, tourism associated with protected areas may provide a range of benefits to people living nearby. Many of the positive impacts of protected areas in this study were found in protected areas with established tourism.

Gerkey began working on the research as a post-doctoral researcher at the National Socio-Environmental Synthesis Center at the University of Maryland. One of the missions of the center is to examine environmental and [social problems](#) by synthesizing existing data to better understand how environmental and social initiatives intersect.

The research team, led by corresponding author Robin Naidoo of the World Wildlife Fund and the University of British Columbia, included conservation scientists, health experts, demographers, environmental economists, ecologists, geographers and anthropologists. The study is part of a broader project organized by Brendan Fisher and Taylor Ricketts of the University of Vermont.

The researchers compiled one of the largest and most comprehensive socioeconomic and environmental data sets to analyze impacts of protected areas on human well-being around the world. The data included environmental and socioeconomic data from about 87,000 children in 60,000 households either near—within 10 kilometers—or far from 600 protected areas in 34 developing countries around the world.

In their analysis, the researchers found:

- Households situated near protected areas associated with tourism had higher levels of wealth, by 17 percent, and lower levels of poverty by 16 percent, compared to similar households living far from the protected areas.
- Children under age 5 living near multiple-use protected areas had higher height-for-age scores, by 10 percent, and were less likely to have stunted growth, by 13 percent, than similar children living far from the protected areas.

"The multiple-use areas are where you see a lot of the positive impacts for people's health and wealth," Gerkey said. "The boundaries are

relaxed in a way that allows local people to access resources but doesn't impinge on the larger goal of conservation."

The findings provide important context to the ongoing debate over the benefits and drawbacks of protected areas, for both people and nature. But the results also raise more questions for future research, Gerkey said.

"Our study supports the idea that protected areas can benefit [local people](#) when they allow people some of level of access and support tourism," Gerkey explained. "But we need to know more about the conditions that allow multiple-use and tourism to improve people's well-being, and that will take more research on the ground as well as comparative studies like ours."

**More information:** R. Naidoo at WWF-US in Washington, DC et al., "Evaluating the impacts of protected areas on human well-being across the developing world," *Science Advances* (2019). [DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.aav3006](#) , [advances.sciencemag.org/content/5/4/eaav3006](https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/5/4/eaav3006)

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