

Land conservation helps local economies grow

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Land conservation modestly increases employment rates, a traditional indicator of economic growth, according to an analysis of New England cities and towns, led by scientists at Amherst College, Harvard Forest, the Highstead Foundation, and Boston University.

The study, published today in *Conservation Biology*, is the first of its kind, estimating the local net impacts of both private and public land conservation over 25 years (1990-2015) across 1500 cities and towns that are home to 99.97% of New England's population.

The study shows that when land protection increased, employment increased over the next five-year period, even when controlling rigorously for other associated factors. "Employment gains were modest but significant across the region, and the effect was amplified in more [rural areas](#)," says Kate Sims, Chair of the Economics Department at Amherst College and a co-lead author of the study. To illustrate the study's results, she explained that if a town with 50,000 people employed increased its land protection by 50%, it saw, on average, 750 additional people employed in the next five years.

Conservation—the permanent protection of land from developed uses—has long been viewed by skeptics as a loss of possible local tax revenue from new development or resource extraction, and thus painted as incompatible with economic growth. Proponents of land protection point to the fact that conservation can reduce the cost of community services, while providing both indirect economic benefits—such as clean water and flood protection—and direct economic gains such as increased real estate and amenity values and inputs to the forest and farm products industry.

Prior studies have mainly focused on the impacts of public land conservation such as national parks, and in the Western U.S. The current study builds on analyses by the Harvard Forest and Highstead

to track and learn from the unique framework of land protection efforts in New England, which include large amounts of privately-owned land.

The authors say gains in employment following increases in conservation may be driven by new jobs in tourism and recreation—a sector that provides 52 billion dollars a year in direct spending, according to estimates by the Outdoor Industry Association. The authors also point to the preservation of jobs in areas with commercial timberlands that support timber harvests, non-timber forest products such as maple syrup, and public access and recreational activities.

The scientists saw small gains in median household income, overall population, and employment in recreation, tourism, and arts-based industries as a result of land conservation, though the effects were not statistically significant. They saw no change in the number of new building permits when conservation increased, suggesting that protecting land does not reduce housing development, but redirects where it occurs.

Today, about a quarter of New England's land base is permanently conserved. "More than half of the region's conservation has occurred within the last 25 years," says Spencer Meyer, Senior Conservationist at Highstead and a co-author of the study. "We now have further evidence that conservation generally boosts, rather than depresses, local economies through job growth."

"New England is unique," says Jonathan Thompson, Senior Ecologist at Harvard Forest and co-lead author of the study. "Most of its land is privately owned by hundreds of thousands of individual landowners. We've now shown that when private landowners protect their land, the benefits extend beyond nature and into their communities, too."

The team notes that more research, especially on

property values and tax revenues, is needed to get a more complete picture of the costs and benefits of land [conservation](#).

Provided by Harvard University

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