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Study: BWCAW an economic boost

'A good thing for the people who live and work in the area'



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Canoeists paddle into the sunset on Farm Lake, near Ely.

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Marshall Helmberger

REGIONAL— A first of its kind economic study has concluded that overnight visitors to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness spent approximately \$57 million in communities around the edge of the 1.1 million-acre wilderness in 2015.

Those expenditures were directly responsible for generating 635 full-time equivalent jobs in the affected communities, including Ely, Grand Marais, and Tofte. The study found that a total of 817 jobs were created by the wilderness, when indirect and induced effects are included in the calculation.

Economic output totaled \$77 million when indirect and induced activity was considered.

The study, conducted by Dr. Evan Hjerpe of the Conservation Economics Institute was supported by the Quetico-Superior Foundation and Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness. According to Friends' executive director Paul Danicic, the study represents the first academically-rigorous assessment of the economic impact from canoeists in the Boundary Waters using IMPLAN, a widely-used model designed to gauge both direct and indirect effects from various types of economic activity.

"Our goal was to better understand and statistically validate the role of the wilderness in the area economy," said Danicic, who noted that the study looks at only a relatively small slice of the overall economic impact of Boundary Waters related tourism. The study, which involved surveying hundreds of canoeists who utilized various wilderness outfitters, looks only at the summertime impact of overnight canoeists from outside the local area. It did not consider the impact of winter use of the wilderness, or of wilderness use by area residents.

Perhaps most significantly, the study did not consider the economic impact of the thousands of visitors drawn to many of the large non-profit camps in the region, such as the Northern Tier Boy Scout base, Voyageur Outward Bound, or YMCA camps like Widjiwagan or Camp du Nord, which collectively provide significant economic impact to the local area, along with employment for hundreds of workers. Nor does the study consider the economic impacts from visitors who stay in the area, at a lake home, resort, or hotel, without undertaking an overnight canoe trip. Day use of the wilderness, for hiking, berry picking, hunting, and canoeing, does not require an overnight permit. "There's no way this was designed as the be-all and end-all study," said Danicic. Even so, he said, the limited cross section looked at by the study "confirms that the Boundary Waters is a good thing for the people who live and work in the area."

Economic analyses of the impact of wilderness areas are rare. Most recreation related studies in the past have focused on specific local industries, such as river rafting in the Grand Canyon. But Hjerpe, who led the Grand Canyon study, said the available research points to outdoor recreation as a significant, long-term economic stimulus in gateway communities, such as Ely or Grand Marais. "These regional economic impacts are sustainable into the future and can be critical in helping keep protected lands conserved for future generations," writes Hjerpe in his Boundary Waters report.

The study comes at a time when the economic impact of the wilderness has become a source of controversy in the public debate over proposed copper-nickel

mining on the edge of the Boundary Waters. Copper mining opponents have argued that the wilderness will be an economic boost, 13204 communities like Ely, and that copper-nickel mining, and its potential environmental effects, threatens to upend this already-established economic activity. At the same time, mining supporters contend that the economic impact of the wilderness is largely limited to seasonal and part-time work.

Danicic said he recognizes that perspective. "There's a challenge because many of the neighboring communities are facing economic challenges," he said. "We wanted to show the contribution of the wilderness in a valid way."

The Boundary Waters attracts about 150,000 annual visits, making it the most heavily visited wilderness in the U.S. And the vast majority of those visitors come from outside the Arrowhead region, which means they bring outside dollars into the local economy. "The author points out that this is like an export economy," noted Danicic. "It's money coming in rather than going out of the economy."

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