

## Ecotourism

### A Growth Industry for Rural Communities

BY PAUL KERLINGER AND GLENN HOAGLAND

*Ecotourism is an \$8 billion industry in the United States and the fastest growing segment of the tourism industry*

Until very recently, most people viewed the environment and business as two factions in an irreconcilable battle. However, the world is changing, and there are new types of environmentalists and business persons who see the unspoiled environment not only as beautiful and precious, but also as economically important. This new breed is asking questions that most environmentalists never dreamed of asking, such as: "What is nature worth?" "What is the value of a forest left uncut?" "What is a pileated woodpecker worth?" "Is a forest, farm, cliff, or wetland worth more to a community as open space or as a housing development?"

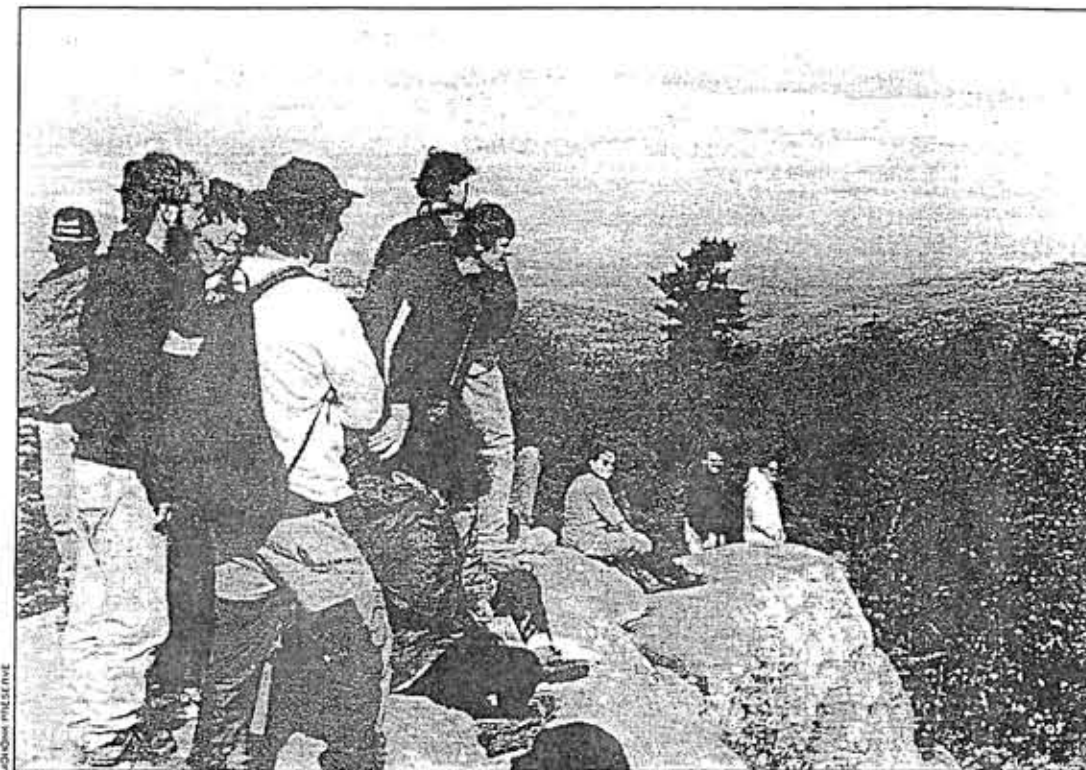
Ecotourism, or nature tourism, is the most obvious way that open space and wildlife pay. Today, ecotourism is a boom industry in the United States. People want to see bears, turkeys, whales, swamps, and mountain vistas. They want to do things outdoors in settings that are interesting and aesthetically pleasing. They want to walk in nature, to climb it, cross country ski in it, see it, and enjoy it. They are willing to pay for the privilege of doing these things. Ecotourism is an \$8 billion industry in the United States and the fastest growing segment of the tourism industry.

Although not much is known about the economic value of wildlife and open space in New York State, a recent study at the Mohonk Preserve, situated on the Shawangunk Ridge near New Paltz, revealed that ecotourism generates important revenue for some communities. The 6,000-acre Mohonk Preserve, New York's largest nonprofit nature preserve, hosts about 100,000 visitors each year who come to enjoy the incomparable views and scenery. The 1993 study, funded by LTA/New York and several

local businesses, revealed that Mohonk Preserve visitors contribute nearly \$3 million to the Mid-Hudson Valley Region economy. This means that the value of an acre of the preserve is worth, on average, about \$500 per year to local businesses. The same ecotourists provide about 75 jobs for the region.

The Mohonk Preserve is part of a 20,000+ acre tract of preserved land, which includes the Mohonk Mountain House and the Minnewaska State Park Preserve. Together, these public and private natural areas attract nearly 500,000 visitors each year, pumping more than \$10 million into the local economy. The businesses that benefit most are motels, campgrounds, bed and breakfasts, restaurants, quick markets, and gas stations. Visitors to Mohonk Preserve were credited with spending at least 13,000 nights in local accommodations. They also purchased goods and services from local shops and businesses, including guide services, outdoor clothing and gear, books, antiques, and souvenirs. Several businesses would not exist without ecotourists. Rich Gottlieb, co-owner of Rock & Snow, a mountaineering store in New Paltz, notes, "I'm one of many businessmen who recognize that a healthy percentage of my sales are to outdoor recreationists who come here for the 'Gunks.'" The study also revealed that, annually, about \$1.5 million was spent on food, and another \$900,000 on lodging by Preserve visitors.

Because of its economic potential, ecotourism is fostering a new sense of cooperation between land conservationists and the business community. In Cape May, New Jersey, for example, more than 100,000 birding ecotourists contribute \$10+ million annually to the local



Ecotourists hiking the Shawangunk Ridge

economy. The new Cape May National Wildlife Refuge promises to provide an even greater economic boost to the region. Once local officials and business people in Cape May learned of the economic impact of bird watchers on their communities, they became supporters of the new refuge and for the preservation of additional forests and wetlands. The head of the Motel Owners Association in Cape May summed it up by saying, "We don't want to shoot the goose that lays the golden eggs."

In Sierra Vista, Arizona, where The Nature Conservancy owns and manages several preserves, township officials and planners, along with the local chamber of commerce and the conservancy, now host a hummingbird festival in honor of the dozen species of hummingbirds that visit their area. They realized that the more than 30,000 birding ecotourists who come to Sierra Vista each year are an important economic asset to their community. Indeed, ecotourism brings more than \$6 million a year to this small town.

Who are these ecotourists? Visitors to Mohonk Preserve were, on average, 43 years old, mostly male (67%); 86% had at least a four-year college degree; and more than 41% had

family incomes in excess of \$60,000 per year. These characteristics make them attractive to the business community. They have money to spend and leisure time, and they do not require a great amount of supervision from police.

With the growing success of ecotourism, land managers and conservationists have had to re-think access and use policies. Too many visitors can spoil an area. They can destroy trails and habitat and disturb wildlife. This is not only bad for the environment, it can, if unchecked, reduce the attractiveness of an area to tourists and impact local business.

The best solution to the problem of too many ecotourists is to limit access. National and state parks, as well as private parks and preserves, often have a maximum number of tourists they allow into an area. At the Mohonk Preserve, the number of visitors allowed on the preserve at one time is contained through parking capacity and caps on day-pass sales. Those who arrive after access capacity is reached are given a brochure that directs them to nearby areas that receive less use.

When an area experiences too many ecotourists, the local community should take note. It obviously means that the area is attractive to

ecotourists and that business can benefit. It also means that more land needs to be preserved to accommodate people.

Despite the fact that ecotourism may have a negative side, the alternatives to preserving land and developing ecotourism are usually uglier. Without the economic incentives of ecotourism, lands may be subdivided for housing developments or condominiums. Both eliminate habitat for wildlife and make the area less scenic. In addition, these alternatives are usually less attractive economically than ecotourism because, unlike parks and preserves, people move into houses and condominiums. Once they do, they require services (schools, police, fire, etc.) and infrastructure (roads, community buildings, etc.). This leads to greater spending by the local government and higher property taxes. By contrast, parks and preserves require a far smaller investment than most forms of development. Forests and wetlands can be considered natural infrastructure that take care of themselves and need little maintenance, other than trail upkeep and regular patrolling. Undeveloped areas that attract ecotourism dol-

lars without costing the community much to maintain are valuable community assets. Even though many are legally property tax-exempt, they often produce a substantial net positive economic gain for the community.

As increasing numbers of people recognize the economic benefits of ecotourism, there is certain to be greater cooperation between the business and environmental communities. Studies to date suggest that ecotourism can provide a viable tool for protecting habitat, open space, and wildlife in the years ahead.

*Paul Kerlinger is an environmental and ecotourism consultant who lives in New York City. He has just completed the study cited in this article for the Mohonk Preserve with a grant from the Rural New York Land Trust Grant Program. Glenn Hoagland is the executive director of the Mohonk Preserve. Paul and Glenn will present the study in detail at LTA/NY's Annual Conference this June (see conference schedule in this issue). In addition, a slide show and brochure summarizing the findings will be available soon from the Mohonk Preserve.*