

Is ROI Measured Only in Dollars and Cents?

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People are always looking for a bargain. That's just what they get from national wildlife refuges.

Certainly the 2013 *Banking on Nature* report gives hard numbers: \$4.87 returned for every \$1 appropriated in fiscal year 2011, and \$2.4 billion pumped into the economy that year.

What can't be measured as easily in dollars and cents are the personal and health reasons that make wildlife refuges so valuable. We haven't been able to quantify the value of wildlife refuges' contributions to the nation's clean air and clean water. We haven't come up with a calibration on how wildlife refuges benefit kids in their personal well-being and even in their schoolwork.

How can we measure the importance of giving families a chance to find free and easy-to-reach recreation? How do we quantify the pleasure of a walk in the woods not only to see wildlife but also to talk to kids in a way you can do only when you're surrounded by nature? What is the dollar-and-cents equation of a chance to see the beauty of wilderness or the opportunity to be alone with your thoughts? What metrics can calculate the adrenaline rush when people living in big cities get to see an eagle soar or an elk and its calf?

What's the return on investment for giving happiness?

We might not be able to measure every return on investment in national wildlife refuges, but visitors know a bargain when they see one. That's why we've had an 8 percent increase in visitation since fiscal year 2010, even as our budgets have gone in the opposite direction. Some of the increases in participation have been astounding: 52 percent uptick in photography, 45 percent growth in attendance at interpretive programs and talks, and a 14 percent increase in people driving auto tour routes.

It may seem contradictory that I, a wildlife biologist, find no greater excitement than seeing youngsters light up when they hold a lizard for the first time or learn the name of a bird they never noticed before. I love wildlife biology – I love restoring habitat, conducting a wildlife survey or helping an endangered species get one step closer to recovery. But when I can pass my amazement about wildlife to a new generation of would-be biologists, I know that I am ensuring that whooping cranes, Moapa dace and thousands of other wildlife species will be around in a hundred years to inspire children.

What's the return on investment for ensuring that the natural wealth of our nation will enrich generation after generation? Maybe some economists can measure that. In the meantime, we can be assured that national wildlife refuges are enriching our nation in ways that people can appreciate, even if they can't fully appraise them.