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An estimated 13.9 million people visited the Blue Ridge Parkway in 2014, spending more than $800 million in gateway regions.

Parks bring more than $1 billion to NC

Blue Ridge Parkway, Smokies top list for spending in national parks

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ASHEVILLE — The Blue Ridge Parkway and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park are not only two of the most beloved national parks in the country, but they also draw in the big bucks.

Visitors spent more money while visiting the Blue Ridge Parkway last year than in any other national park.

So says a new National Park Service report, which shows almost 17 million visitors to national parks in North Carolina spent $1.1 billion in the state in 2014. That spending resulted in 18,528 jobs and had a cumulative benefit to the state economy of $1.5 billion.

"The national parks of North Carolina attract visitors from across the country and around the world," regional director Stan Austin said in a statement. "Whether visitors come to explore the natural and cultural attractions along the Outer Banks, or enjoy the poetic pursuits of Carl Sandburg with a visit to his home, visitors come to have a great experience, and end up having an economic benefit to the communities they visit."

The new report shows that national park tourism is a significant driver in the national economy — returning $10 for every $1 invested in the National Park Service — and a big factor in the state's economy as well, officials said.

The national park sites in Western North Carolina are the Blue Ridge Parkway, which runs through Asheville, Great Smoky Mountains, and Carl Sandburg Home National Historic Site.

Other parks in the state are: Cape Hatteras National Seashore, Cape Lookout National Seashore, Fort Raleigh National Historic Site, Guilford Courthouse National Military Park, Moores Creek National Battlefield, and Wright Brothers National Memorial.

The report showed the Blue Ridge Parkway, which spans 469 miles of roadway from Cherokee to Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, brought in the biggest bang for the buck.

In 2014, park visitors spent an estimated $863.5 million in local gateway regions while visiting the Blue Ridge Parkway. Those expenditures supported 14,000 jobs, $408.8 million in labor income, $678.6 million in value added (a measure of contribution of National Park Service visitor spending to the Gross Domestic Product of a regional economy) for a total of $1.2 billion in economic output in communities surrounding the parkway.

The parkway was the second-most visited park in 2014, with nearly 14 million visitors.

Spending is up more than 10 percent last year over the year before, said Leesa Brandon, parkway spokeswoman. In 2013, visitor spending was $782 million. Jobs supported by the parkway are also up, from 11,283 in 2013, to 14,020 last year.