Tourism expected to grow here

Upstate treasures still undiscovered

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The Blue Wall Escarpment and the mountain lakes and streams in the Upstate are undiscovered South Carolina treasures, said Douglas Woodward, an economist with the University of South Carolina Moore School of Business.

When they become known to people outside the region, they could increase the importance of eco-based tourism in the mountains and foothills of South Carolina, he said.

"I think in the future there will be increasing tourism in the Upstate," he said, based on eco-tourism, the fastest growing segment of the travel industry.

The Greenville Convention and Visitors Bureau and others are counting on that as they work toward the creation of two tourism-based attractions. One, tentatively known as the Go Experience, will be based downtown and will help visitors learn about Greenville's cultural and art experiences. The Blue Wall center will be based at the old Camp Spearman site on State 11 and will introduce visitors to the outdoor attractions in the region.

To attract visitors, however, natural resources must be protected and preserved, said Woodward and Emmett I. Davis Jr., chairman of the South Carolina Natural Resources Society.

An economic impact study recently conducted by Woodward and others showed that natural resources in the state contribute nearly $30 billion in economic activity annually. The sector — which crosses all business sector lines — supports 236,000 South Carolina jobs, which bring in nearly $8 billion in income.

That's a surprise to many people, who enjoy the state's natural resources but never consider them as part of the economy, he said.

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The economic impact study is important because "it dramatically shows the inextricable link between protecting our natural resources and economic growth," said Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever. "I'm hopeful this study will be a huge wake-up call for this state."

Woodward pointed out that "natural resources are not just tourism. They are important in manufacturing, mining and quarrying and forestry. Commercial fishing is based on natural resources as is outdoor recreation such as hunting, fishing and wildlife viewing. Much of the recreational boat and paper products manufacturing are based in other parts of the state, but quarrying and forestry are Upstate industries.

Housing is another economic sector that can be based heavily on an area's natural resources, said Jim Anthony, founder of Cliffs Communities, who said his company has brought more than 300,000 families to the Upstate.

"The primary reason is our beautiful land, our mountains and our lakes," he said. Natural resources are "the heart of our business."

But intangible benefits may be at least as important.

Beauty and an outdoor lifestyle are among the attractions a highly educated work force — the kind South Carolina is attempting to recruit and retain, Woodward said. That type of labor force is vital in creating new well-paying jobs.

Recent USC research looked at location choices across all U.S. counties by U.S. inventors, he said. A natural amenities index was used to determine where inventors were likely to choose to live. Ventura County, Calif., scored highest on the amenities scale.

"We have got to maintain, protect and conserve our natural resources," said Norman Pulliam a state Department of Natural Resources Board member, because they "will become an even greater economic driver" in the future.

This may be difficult in the midst of a recession, Davis said.

"DNR is stressed today because of tough economic conditions," but the future of the state's economic growth demands that its natural resources be managed, maintained and protected.

"Well-managed natural resources are essential for economic development," the report said.

John Frampton, director of the state Department of Natural Resources, which initiated the study, agreed.

"The state's natural resources should be at the center of local and regional economic development policy," he said.

The study found that recreational fishing, hunting and wildlife viewing in 2008 generated $3.79 billion and supported more than 58,000 jobs. Coastal tourism, which supported nearly 81,000 jobs in 2008, generated a total impact of $7 billion that year. Forestry, a renewable and sustainable sector, supports 83,824 jobs and had a total economic impact of $17.14 billion. Mining, which includes stone quarrying, generated total economic activity of $393.9 million and supports 2,558 jobs.

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