Wealth of beauty brings state rich reward

USC study finds environmental assets attract jobs, industry

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South Carolina's natural resources — its coasts, marshes, mountains, forests, lakes, rivers and land — are a vital part of the state's economic activity, an asset in attracting additional business and jobs to the state, according to a new study by the University of South Carolina's Moore School of Business.

The bottom line, said Doug Woodward, an economist in the school's Division of Research, is that natural resources, excluding agriculture, sustain total economic activity of just under $30 billion annually and support 236,000 jobs. That represents about 12.5 percent of the state's workforce and generates just under $8 billion in worker income.

"It was an eye-opener," he told a small crowd at Main Street Plaza in Falls Park. "This is truly our state's greatest asset along with our education labor force."

Too few South Carolinians realize the economic value of their natural resources, he said.

Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever, said the economic impact study is important because "it dramatically shows the inextricable link between protecting our natural resources and economic growth.

"I'm hopeful this study will have a huge wake-up call for this state," he and others said.

Emmett I. Davis Jr., chairman of the South Carolina Natural Resources Society, said it is incumbent on each citizen as well as government agencies to maintain, protect and enhance the state's natural resources.

"This is where we live and these are the assets we should protect for the benefit of our present and future generations," he said.

The study, the first of its kind in South Carolina, focused on the economic impact of outdoor recreation such as hunting and fishing, forestry, coastal tourism, mining, recreational boat manufacturing and commercial fishing.

Woodward said the report shows that "South Carolina is a land of incredible bounty and beauty" and that it makes economic sense to protect those resources. In addition to the economic impact, natural resources have benefits that can't be quantified, such as helping to attract and retain an educated labor force and improving health.

The state's natural resources "should be effectively used as part of economic development efforts," he said.