

## THE BUFFALO NEWS



Tour guide Manuela Scott takes photos of Suzanne Heijbrock, left, of the Netherlands, and her friend Zoe Georgiou, of Australia, at the falls in Niagara Falls State Park on Tuesday.

Harry Scull Jr./Buffalo News

Updated: 03/27/09 04:25 PM

# State parks impact is \$500 million annually, study says

*Latest study shows system has huge impact on local economy*

By Aaron Besecker

## NEWS NIAGARA REPORTER

A study prepared for a parks advocacy organization says nearly 5,000 jobs and more than a half-billion dollars in annual economic output are tied to state parks in Erie and Niagara counties.

The total economic impact statewide due to the spending of the state parks office and park visitors is nearly \$2 billion and is tied to more than 20,000 jobs, according to the study prepared for Parks and Trails New York, an Albany-based nonprofit.

The study, released earlier this month, looked at operations and capital spending by the parks agency, as well as the dollars spent by visitors, and the potential effects on employment, incomes and economic activity. The study reports there is more than a fivefold return for every dollar invested in state parks.

State Sen. George D. Maziarz, R-Newfane, told The Buffalo News on Thursday he regularly sees economic impact reports claiming even higher ratios of return on state investment than what is claimed in this case.

While Maziarz said he was skeptical of some of the numbers in the report, he added, "Clearly the parks are a positive economic force."

Reaction to the report was expectedly enthusiastic from the state's top parks official.

"This report clearly points out that parks are not just enjoyable destinations, but also important economic drivers in communities throughout the state," Carol Ash, commissioner of the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, said in a statement.

The agency's Niagara region, which consists of 19 sites in Erie and Niagara counties, is one of three regions in the state that sees the greatest effect from its parks, in part because of the number of non-local visitors, according to the study.

In the 2007-08 fiscal year, the total number of visitors to state parks in the Niagara region, which includes Niagara Falls State Park, the country's first state park, was 10.3 million, according to the study.

Regional parks officials said Thursday they expect a 15 percent cut in the agency's operating budget for the 2009-10 fiscal year.

Peter Lombardi, senior research associate at the University at Buffalo Regional Institute, said it is important for parks systems to have a reliable stream of funding that allow for long-term planning of capital improvements.

Lombardi also noted the Parks and Trails study did point out the importance of not only the economic impact of parks, but the "intangible benefits to cities and regions."

Good parks raise an area's quality of life, which can attract and retain talent, Lombardi said.

In the current fiscal year, the agency's statewide budget consists of \$253 million for operating costs, as well as nearly \$88 million for capital costs. State parks in Erie and Niagara counties, under the current budget, have an operating budget of \$25.1 million and a capital budget of \$5.3 million.

In late 2007, Ash said the agency had asked then-Gov. Eliot L. Spitzer for more than \$650 million for statewide capital improvements; \$104 million was for Erie and Niagara county facilities alone.

Thomas A. Chambers, an associate history professor at Niagara University with an expertise in heritage tourism, said that while the agency could do more for the area's facilities, he believes it has done a pretty good job for the

area.

“This region does have an incredible series of resources. If they did even more, we can capitalize on what we do have,” Chambers said.

In the Village of Youngstown, which abuts a state park as well as Old Fort Niagara, the municipality and the state parks agency work together to maintain 18 soccer fields in Fort Niagara State Park.

Mayor Neil C. Riordan said that work helps draw both local and international soccer tournaments.

“That alone is a huge impact,” said Riordan, who added the village is looking to better capitalize on the opportunity its businesses have to draw on crowds from the park.

The study was prepared by the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

To read the full report, visit Parks and Trails New York’s Web site, [www.ptny.org](http://www.ptny.org).

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