Putting a price on nature - The Boston Globe

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Environmental advocates, meanwhile, raise their own economic imperatives, arguing that industrial development in the forest would harm salmon fishing, which generates $986 million a year, and damage Alaskan tourism, an industry that dwarfs both timber and seafood processing. As a former US Forest Service official put it recently to The Washington Post, "the golden goose is the salmon, not the trees."

You can't blame forest advocates for engaging in economic tit-for-tat to save this hallowed resource. Money, after all, is the language Washington understands. But it's a disheartening trend when a price is put on all of nature's creations, as if these ancient cathedrals of green were just so many widgets. Reducing nature to a commodity comes with its own traps, leading to the conclusion that ecosystems are only worth saving when they are profitable. A vicious cycle can set in: We degrade the environment, so it becomes less productive, and thus less worthy of protection.

Markets work in mercurial ways. A recent World Bank report put Boston near the top of the planet's most economically at-risk cities when it comes to climate change. That's because of our vulnerable coastal location, but also because a lot of expensive real estate along the Boston Harbor is at stake. Is the threat of global warming really more urgent in Boston than it is in Bangladesh?

The problem with applying a pure cost-benefit analysis to conservation debates is that it pits immediate, tangible financial gain against a hazier long-term loss. The stronger case for conservation of precious natural resources is an appeal not to our wallets but to our hearts, and yes, our souls.

You don't have to be a transcendentalist or mystic to appreciate the spiritual value of America's wild places. President Teddy Roosevelt, the red-blooded Rough Rider who founded the US Forest Service in 1905, revered trees for their own sake. Sickly and asthmatic as a boy, he often went to the woods to heal. After his wife and mother died on the same day in 1884, he retreated to a North Dakota wilderness ranch for two years as a salve for his broken heart. "There are no words that can tell the hidden spirit of the wilderness," he wrote, "that can reveal its mystery, its melancholy and its charm."

Of course, Roosevelt also understood the political and practical necessity of touting the monetary worth of nature. In Timothy Egan's history of the National Forest Service, "The Big Burn," Roosevelt sells ranchers and loggers on the radical idea of public lands by convincing them that federal management will protect these economically valuable resources from fire.

Still, Roosevelt never doubted the proper balance between protection and exploitation. "We have become great because of the lavish use of our resources," he said. "But the time has come to inquire seriously what will happen when our forests are gone, when the coal, the iron, the oil, and the gas are exhausted, when the soils have still further impoverished and washed into the streams, polluting the rivers, denuding the fields and obstructing navigation."

"The time has come"? Roosevelt spoke those words in 1908.

Renée Loth's column appears regularly in the Globe.