



# The 2024 Economic Impact Of The Roger Williams Park Zoo

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September 12, 2025

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## Executive Summary

The Roger Williams Park Zoo is an important contributor to the Rhode Island economy. Researchers at the University of Rhode Island worked with the Rhode Island Zoological Society to conduct a study of the economic impact of the Zoo and its associated activities in 2024.

In 2024, the Zoo attracted 801,296 visitors, including an estimated 347,308 visitors from out of state (43%). In 2024, the Zoo and its vendors had gross operating income, including gifts, \$19.3 million and 509 jobs on-site. These totals are significant increases from 2017 largely driven by the popularity of special events.

We estimate that out-of-state visitors spent an additional \$36.9 million (+/- 21.6%) on tourism while visiting Rhode Island because of the Zoo in 2024. Spillovers to other sectors of the Rhode Island economy were estimated using IMPLAN. We estimate the total economic impact of the Zoo in 2024 was \$75.4 million and 864 jobs. This impact generated \$5.2 million in state and local tax revenue. Most notably, the Zoo generated a value-added impact of \$54.4 million in 2024, representing a 12.8% increase over 2021 after accounting for inflation. Rhode Island has grown at an annual pace of 2.4% from 2021 (US Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2025). The economic impact of the Zoo has expanded to outpace the general economy in the last 3 years and significantly more than the RI economy from 2017.

## Data and Methods

We followed the standard approach in recent zoo economic impact studies in Baltimore (Maryland Department of Business & Economic Development, 2012), Cincinnati (University of Cincinnati Economics Center Research and Consulting, 2023), Columbus (Regionomics, 2022), Detroit (CSL International, 2019), Memphis (University of Memphis, 2015), and San Diego (San Diego Taxpayers Educational Foundation, 2018) by using an input and out model of economic impacts. This approach combines direct spending at the Zoo and its vendors with tourism spending by out-of-area visitors.

We obtained the Zoo’s financial statements for 2024, including a breakdown of vendor incomes (retail, food and beverage), event-specific revenues, and all other operating income.

**Table 1: Spending at Zoo and Vendors**

Source	Amount, \$M
Vendor Income: Food and Beverage	\$ 1.01
Vendor Income: Retail	\$ 0.41
Vendor Income: Photography	\$ 1.41
Events (Spectaculars)	\$ 4.80
Concession Commissions	\$ 1.19
Other Zoo Operating	\$ 9.49
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$ 19.30</b>

For consistency with previous studies, we considered only tourism spending of out-of-area visitors, which we designated as visitors with a home ZIP code outside Rhode Island. Tourism spending was estimated via a visitor email survey using the standard methodology of asking visitors to report spending outside the Zoo during the trip, by category of expense (food, shopping, gas, rental car, etc.).

Out of 500 surveys collected from out of state visitors, we obtained 374 tourism spending observations for a response rate of 74.8%. We find statistically significant differences in tourism spending between member versus non-member visitors as out-of-state visitors spend more on their visits and are less likely to be members of the zoo. We did find substantial variability in spending per visit, resulting in a 95% confidence interval of +/- 21.6% on all tourism spending estimates.

We do not find a strong correlation between the reported importance of the trip and the spending by visitors in the survey and therefore we do not weight spending by importance, as was done in Sproul et al. (2021). Table 2 reflects the out-of-state visitor budgets.

**Table 2: Out-of-State Visitor Budgets per Day**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Amount</b>	<b>Share</b>
Food and Beverage	\$27.33	19.7%
Retail and Entertainment	\$54.57	39.3%
Lodging	\$19.26	13.9%
Transportation	\$37.82	27.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$138.97</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Roughly 47% of respondents indicated that they would still take the trip to Rhode Island if the Zoo were closed and that they would spend roughly 0.56 less days on the trip due to the Zoo being closed. To be conservative we reduce the out of state spending by 23.4% to account for spending that would have occurred regardless of the Zoo being available to out-of-state visitors in the following impacts.

In Table 3 below, the Zoo, event promoters and limited-service restaurants are all based on spending at the Zoo. Retail miscellaneous includes both spending at the Zoo and shopping and entertainment tourism spending. All other categories contain only tourism spending estimates. Any tourism spending (including part of retail) is further down weighted by the local purchase percentage (LPP) from the IMPLAN model’s social accounting matrix (SAM) to account for the share of tourism demand satisfied by non-Rhode Island companies. The estimates were entered into the IMPLAN input-output model for Rhode Island to calculate economic impacts for

2024. All figures are in 2024 dollars, estimated using the latest IMPLAN modeling data for 2023.

**Table 3: Total Zoo and Tourism Spending**

<b>IMPLAN Category</b>	<b>Amount, \$M</b>	
Insurance	\$	3.30
Photographic Services	\$	2.80
Food and Groceries, Retail	\$	5.04
Gasoline, Retail	\$	1.18
Hotels	\$	5.26
Museums, Historical Sites, Zoos and Parks	\$	14.50
Real Estate	\$	6.99
Restaurants, Full Service	\$	5.74
Retail, Miscellaneous	\$	3.81
Transit	\$	2.11
Other, Misc	\$	24.72
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>75.45</b>

Note: All categories in Other are less than \$1.5 Million.

### Other Studies

Before running the input-output estimates, we checked our estimates against our own recent Zoo study, and the recent zoo economic impact studies mentioned above. The recent study for the San Diego Zoo was excluded because it is not a reasonable comparison due to the scale.

The table below shows our tourism spending estimates are lower than the estimates used in our previous study, and also lower than other independently generated estimates from recent studies. The Memphis estimate appears to be higher in part because the Memphis Zoo is one of the top tourist attractions in all of Tennessee, and it brings large numbers of overnight visitors from out-of-state.

While the per-visitor spending at the Roger Williams Park Zoo has increased at the zoo from 2021, it is in line with other studies.

**Table 4: Per-Visitor Spending Comparison with Recent Studies**

Spend Category	This Study (2024)	RWP Zoo (2021)	Baltimore (2011)	Detroit (2017)	Memphis (2014)
Zoo and Vendors	\$ 24.08	\$ 25.24	\$ 43.72	\$ 39.85	\$ 27.93
Other Tourism	\$ 138.97	\$ 102.54	\$ 120.32	\$ 146.27	\$ 369.55
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$ 163.05</b>	<b>\$ 127.78</b>	<b>\$ 164.05</b>	<b>\$ 186.13</b>	<b>\$ 397.48</b>

\*All values are adjusted to 2024 dollars. Memphis estimates count out-of-area visitors as any visitors from outside of the Memphis MSA. All others use out-of-state visitors only. RI sales tax of 7% is not included for spending at the Zoo and vendors in the present study (but it is included for tourism), nor are zookeeper payroll and benefits, utilities support per visitor, or Zoo fundraising and gifts per visitor. It is unknown whether the comparison studies include fundraising and/or sales tax.

## Results

Economic impact estimates are presented below. Output estimates are similar to gross sales, but they are adjusted to avoid double-counting in retail and wholesale (Jeong and Crompton, 2015). Value Added estimates are the contribution to Rhode Island Gross State Product (*aka* state-level GDP).

**Table 5: Total Zoo Economic Impact Estimates (2024)**

Effect Type	Jobs	Value Added, \$M	Output, \$M
Direct Effect	674.4	\$ 32.4	\$ 38.9
Indirect Effect	80.2	\$ 8.9	\$ 16.1
Induced Effect	109.8	\$ 13.1	\$ 20.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>864.4</b>	<b>\$ 54.4</b>	<b>\$ 75.4</b>

Direct Effects are attributed directly to total Zoo and vendor spending, and tourism. The Output Effect is \$75.4 million in total spending (in Table 3). Indirect Effects are estimated impacts on upstream suppliers to the Zoo and its vendors, and suppliers to all firms receiving tourism spending. Induced Effects are economic impacts across the broader economy arising from the spending of labor income (i.e., wages) and proprietor income (Lindall and Olson, 2008). In 2024 the Zoo generated 864 jobs, almost \$54 million of gross state product, \$75 million of economic output, and \$5.2 million of state and local tax revenues. This analysis suggests that Zoo contributes over \$54 million to the gross domestic product to the Rhode Island economy.

Roger Williams Park Zoo has generated substantial extra operating income and economic impact by investing in new attractions and events. We analyze special events and attractions below.

### Event Results – The Dragon and Mythical Marvels Spectacular

The Dragons and Mythical Marvels (DMM) is a new event offered by the Zoo that replaced the Asian Lantern Spectacular. It garnered 80,939 visitors in 2024. It is important to note that these visitors purchased tickets to DMM as an add on to regular zoo tickets.

Event specific impact estimates are presented below. Jobs estimates are based on Zoo and vendor employment. Event vendor employment was unavailable, included only via the IMPLAN model. These estimates are particularly conservative as we assume that the addition of the event only generated revenue through the zoo and not additional tourism from out-of-state visitors. This assumption was made due to it being an additional ticket rather than a stand-alone visit to the Zoo.

We estimate that this event alone created \$1.37 million of value added for the Rhode Island economy, as well as \$90,000 of state and local tax revenues.

**Table 6: Economic Impacts of the Dragons and Mythical Marvels (2024)**

<b>Impact</b>	<b>Jobs</b>	<b>Value Added, \$M</b>		<b>Output, \$M</b>
Direct	24.0	\$	0.79	\$ 0.79
Indirect	2.1	\$	0.22	\$ 0.40
Induced	3.0	\$	0.37	\$ 0.57
<b>Total</b>	<b>29.1</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>1.37</b>	<b>\$ 1.76</b>

## Event Results – The Holiday Lights Spectacular

The Holiday Lights Spectacular (HOLS) is a new event offered by the Zoo each Winter since December 2020, with 55,647 visitors in 2024.

Event specific impact estimates are presented below. Jobs estimates are based on Zoo and vendor employment, as well as tourism, proportional to the visitor counts (out of state only for tourism).

We estimate that this event alone created \$3.8 million of value added for the Rhode Island economy, as well as \$394,000 of state and local tax revenues.

**Table 7: Economic Impacts of the Holidays Lights Spectacular (2024)**

<b>Impact</b>	<b>Jobs</b>	<b>Value Added, \$M</b>		<b>Output, \$M</b>
Direct	47.0	\$	2.3	\$ 3.0
Indirect	6.1	\$	0.7	\$ 1.2
Induced	7.5	\$	0.9	\$ 1.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>60.6</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>\$ 5.6</b>

## Event Results – The Jack-O-Lantern Spectacular

The Jack-O-Lantern Spectacular (JOLS) is an enduring, popular event offered by the Zoo each Fall, with 176,322 visitors in 2024, a slight increase since 2021. The event generated \$13.4 million in sales for the Zoo and tourism spending to Rhode Island (an increase since 2021). The economic impact for JOLS was are not directly comparable to in 2021 as this report includes a portion of Zoo salaries relative to the number of visitors to the Zoo. Further, vendor employment and income were not available in 2001 but were available for this report.

Event specific impact estimates are presented below. Jobs estimates are based on Zoo and vendor employment, as well as tourism, proportional to the visitor counts (out of state only for tourism).

We estimate that this event alone created \$15.9 million of value added for the Rhode Island economy, as well as \$1.8 million of state and local tax revenues.

**Table 8: Economic Impacts of the Jack-O-Lantern Spectacular (2024)**

<b>Impact</b>	<b>Jobs</b>	<b>Value Added, \$M</b>		<b>Output, \$M</b>
Direct	178.3	\$	9.4	\$ 13.5
Indirect	27.0	\$	3.0	\$ 5.4
Induced	29.7	\$	3.5	\$ 5.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>235.0</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>15.9</b>	<b>\$ 24.4</b>

## Acknowledgments

This study was produced by Dr. Todd Guilfoos (Professor) in the Department of Environmental & Natural Resource Economics, College of the Environment & Life Sciences, University of Rhode Island.

We are grateful especially to Ron Patalano and Josh Sweeney of the Rhode Island Zoological Society, and to Bart deBont of Portable Insights, without whom this study would not have been possible.

This study was funded by a generous gift to the “Economic and Policy Analysis for Rhode Island” fund at the University of Rhode Island Foundation.

### **Photography Credits**

All photos courtesy of The Roger Williams Park Zoo.

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