Nonmetro Recreation Counties
Their Identification and Rapid Growth

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R
cent migration
trends, fueled in part
by the Nation’s love of
forests, water, and
other natural amenities, are altering
the rural landscape. Since the late
1960s, the United States has seen
both continued growth of metro
populations and renewed popula-
tion increase in many nonmetro
counties. There has been a move
toward population deconcentration,
reflected both in the tendency of
settlement to sprawl outward from
large, densely settled urban cores
and in the recent rural demograph-
ic rebound.

One factor contributing to
deconcentration is movement into
areas rich in natural amenities and
other recreational attractions.
Recreational areas have long
attracted large numbers of visitors.
Recent data show that they are also
attracting many permanent resi-
dents. Once vacationers discover
an area they like, many make
return visits, eventually buy a sec-
ond home there, and finally
migrate to establish their primary
residence in the area (Stewart and
Stynes). Research has found that a
substantial proportion of second
home owners expect to retire to
their second home within 10 years
(Stynes et al., Johnson and Stewart).

Increased recreational activity,
the appeal of second homes, and
the influx of former urbanites into
rural areas all create a demand for
housing and for an expanded busi-
ness, service and governmental
infrastructure to support it. By
increasing local employment and
entrepreneurial opportunities, the
flow of visitors and immigrants also
encourages many current residents
to remain, further bolstering the
population. With the baby boom
generation fast approaching an age
where leisure activities will
increase and retirement migration
will peak, the implications of recre-
ational activities for future overall
nonmetro migration and popula-
tion growth are substantial. This
article outlines a method to identify nonmetro counties with high recreation
development. It then examines the linkage between such development
and population change, and considers its implications for the future of
rural and small-town America.

Based on the empirical and
contextual analysis (see box,
“How Recreation Counties Were
Identified,” p. 14), 329 nonmetro
counties were classed as recreation-
al (44 more than in our earlier
work where somewhat different
data and procedures were used).
They comprise 14.6 percent of all
nonmetro counties and have 15.6

More than 80 percent of the Nation’s 285 million people now reside in
metropolitan areas. Many in this vast city and suburban population are
attracted to the recreational opportunities and attractions of rural
areas, such as beautiful scenery, lakes, mountains, forests, and
resorts. For rural communities struggling to offset job losses from
farming, mining, and manufacturing, capitalizing on the recreational
appeal of an area fosters economic development, attracts new
residents, and retains existing population. This article outlines
a method to identify nonmetro counties with high recreation
development. It then examines the linkage between such development
and population change, and considers its implications for the future of
rural and small-town America.
percent of the nonmetro population. The classification method identifies counties where the relative level of recreation-linked employment, income, and housing is high.

McGranahan created a natural amenity index ranking counties based on desirable physical attributes related to climate, topography, and presence of water (McGranahan). People interested in recreational activity often gravitate to areas with appealing natural features, so there is considerable—although not predominant—overlap between our list and the counties ranked high in natural amenities. Of the recreation counties, 121 (or 37 percent) rank in the top quarter of McGranahan’s natural amenity list.

**Recreation Counties Most Numerous in the Mountain West and Upper Great Lakes Areas**

Counties with high economic dependence on recreation are in 45 States, but there are significant regional concentrations (fig. 1). The Upper Great Lakes and the Northeast have numerous lake-oriented counties that are second-home summer vacation areas of long standing, although they have added winter attractions such as snowmobile trails and skiing. In these counties, it is common for a third to half of all housing units to be seasonal or occasional-use places.

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**Figure 1**

Nonmetro recreation counties

Most recreation counties are in the Mountain West, the Upper Great Lakes country, and New York-New England.
Recreation counties are also scattered throughout the length of the Rocky Mountains, many best known for their national parks or ski resorts, but most include other features conducive to hiking, mountain biking, climbing, fishing, rafting, or just escaping summer heat and humidity. Upland areas of the South also include recreation counties offering many of the same activities as the West, often featuring leisure use of the reservoirs that are the legacy of the dam-building era.

Alaska and Hawaii are also well represented, although very different in appeal. Hawaii’s three recreation counties are all highly developed, thickly populated tropical resorts. In Alaska, where population is sparse, outdoors recreation and the novelty of subarctic location attract enough visitors to place 11 of the States’s county equivalents on our list. Aside from a few casino counties, there is a general dearth of recreation areas in the southern Great Plains, the Corn Belt, and the lower mid-South.

Recreation Counties Come in a Variety of Types

Recreation counties offer visitors and residents a variety of opportunities to pursue leisure
interests. Some of the counties are dominated by a single function. Others have more than one attraction, or different attractions in different seasons. Some of the variation between counties is determined by their geographic location or the physical attributes of the area. To illustrate the variety of recreational settings and types, we classified the counties into 11 types (table 1).

To many people, water and woods activities epitomize recreation and 91 (28 percent) of the recreation counties fit this description. Of these, 70 are in the Great Lakes States and 21 in the Northeast (table 1). Many have been second-home areas for decades. Although population gains in such counties are less than those for recreation counties overall, their growth rates well exceed those for nonmetro counties as a whole. Migration accounts for virtually all of this growth because they have long attracted retirees as well as vacationers, resulting in an older population subject to high mortality.

But, one need not go to the Northwoods lakes to enjoy water and beaches. Thirty-eight counties on both coasts were typed as Coastal Ocean Resorts and an additional 27—located largely in the South—were classed as Reservoir Lake counties. Many counties in these two groups have temperate climates in addition to water access and attract retirees as well as tourists and second-home owners. This is reflected in the demographic data, which show migration gains during the 1990s (especially in the Reservoir counties) but little, if any, natural increase.

Mountainous terrain is the dominant feature in several other recreational types. Twenty counties were so focused on skiing that we labeled them as Ski Resorts, although they usually have summer attractions as well. Another 18 counties were characterized as Other Mountain Areas with Skiing, where skiing is present but not regarded as dominant.

Twenty-one Casino counties are the most recent and unique additions to the recreational mix. They did not exist in the 1980s except for a few in Nevada. The gambling casinos have developed since Federal approval of Indian tribal casinos in 1987 (where consistent with State law), and by the decision of some States to permit non-Indian casinos in designated locations. Some of the casino counties lack any natural amenity base for recreation, in contrast to virtually all other recreation counties. Population gains in these counties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Population change, net migration, and natural increase for recreation county types, 1990-2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recreational subgroup</td>
<td>Population change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of counties</td>
<td>Percent change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest Lake &amp; 2nd Home</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast Mtn, Lake, and 2nd Home</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coastal Ocean Resort</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reservoir Lake</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ski Resort</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Mountain (with ski)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Mountain (exc. ski and Nat’l Park)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Appalachian Mtn Resort</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casino</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Park</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Recreation</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Three Alaska counties excluded because of missing data prior to 2000.
Notes: Recreation types are mutually exclusive and reflect the primary recreation activity, though many support multiple leisure activities.
Percent change is aggregate change for all cases in category.
were moderate compared with other recreation counties, but certainly substantial by national standards of nonmetro growth. There were 32 counties in other recreation types that also had casinos in their recreation mix, but not as the dominant attraction. In addition, a number of non-recreation counties have casinos whose impact was too small to create an exceptional presence of recreation-related employment and income. Altogether, we identified over 130 nonmetro counties outside of Nevada that now have casinos, representing a substantial new addition to the nonmetro employment mix.

National Parks are the principal attraction in 21 recreation counties. This county type is the only one among the recreation types in which net migration did not overwhelmingly dominate the population change. Although migration gains in National Park counties were well above the U.S. average, they were less than half that of all recreation counties. The rate of natural increase in the National Park counties was nearly three times that of recreation counties as a whole. But this is believed to derive largely from the disproportionate presence of American Indian, Alaskan Native, and Mormon communities in the park counties, rather than from any effect of the national parks themselves.

Finally, 28 counties in a Miscellaneous Recreation group have such attractions as historic towns, amusement parks, golfing, hunting, windsurfing, or performance centers, but are either unique or not numerous enough to treat as a separate type. These counties had significant net immigration coupled with above-average natural increase from 1990 to 2000 (table 1).

All Types of Recreation Counties Had Net Inmigration of People

In the 1990s, nonmetro areas experienced a significant population rebound. Such growth was particularly rapid and widespread in recreation counties, where overall population increase was 20.2 per-
cent, compared with 10.4 percent in all nonmetro counties and 13.2 percent in the Nation as a whole (table 2). Most of the recreation county growth was fueled by net immigration of people (84 percent). The rate of migration gain in recreation counties was 2.5 times that in nonmetro counties generally. Such gains were very widespread, occurring in 87 percent of the recreation counties. These gains are likely the result of not only increased inmovement to these counties, but also reduced outmovement of native residents because of the greater economic opportunities provided by immigration.

The rate of natural increase in the recreation counties (i.e., growth from surplus of births over deaths) was slightly lower than elsewhere. Indeed, nearly a third of all recreation counties had more deaths than births. This largely reflects the retirement of many people to these counties who eventually swell the death rate to the point that it exceeds the birth rate.

Although recreation counties have not been immune to events that influence the pace of demographic change in general, they consistently had population and net immigration gains that far exceeded those in other nonmetro counties during each of the last three decades (table 2). In the 1970s, the recreation counties led the remarkable nonmetro growth of that decade. In the 1980s, when nonmetro America as a whole had net outmigration during the long economic downturn of that period, recreation counties continued to attract migrants and had a more rapid growth rate than the national or metro populations.

It is deceptively simple to lump more than 2,300 diverse nonmetro counties into a single category and call it Rural America. To address this concern, USDA’s Economic Research Service developed a typology of counties that groups nonmetro counties into a number of economic and policy-relevant types. Comparing the recreational counties to these ERS groupings provides additional insights into the linkages between demographic change and recreational activity.

In the 1990s, population growth rates in recreation counties exceeded those in all but two of the ERS county types (table 3). The exceptions were retirement-destination counties and those containing large Federal land holdings. The rapid population gain in counties with a high proportion of Federal land derives partly from

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County type</th>
<th>Population change</th>
<th>Net migration</th>
<th>Natural increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent change</td>
<td>Percent growing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retirement</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal lands</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>506</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commuting</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonspecialized</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>535</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>556</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total nonmetro</td>
<td>2,303</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Three Alaska counties excluded due to missing data prior to 2000.
Notes: All types except recreation defined as in Cook and Mizer, 1994 (14 previously metro counties excluded).
A county may be included in more than one type.
Percent change is aggregate change for all counties in category.
the fact that they are mostly in the West, the most rapidly growing U.S. region. Retirement counties are defined as those with significant inmovement of older people in the 1980s, so it is not surprising that they would have an above-average rate of total population increase in the 1990s. But their overall growth of 28.4 percent from 1990 to 2000 is extraordinary. Retirement counties were the only ones with a larger rate of migration gain than recreation counties. More than half of the 190 retirement counties were also recreation counties, as areas with recreational opportunities often attract retirees.

In contrast, it is not surprising that farming counties had only moderate population growth in the 1990s (6.6 percent). Indeed, the surprise is that they grew at all. But growth in recreation counties was also well ahead of that in areas dependent on manufacturing, government work, trade and services, or those with nonspecialized economies. Even counties with high rates of intercounty job commuting—many of which adjoin metro areas and are incipiently suburban—did not match recreation counties in the pace of population increase. In sum, the presence of exceptional recreation activity in rural counties is strongly linked to population growth.

Implications of Recreational Growth

Rural America was settled by people who built their lives and communities by extracting sustenance from bountiful natural resources. Originally it was the soil, forests, animals, and minerals that attracted settlement. Extractive industries based on these resources are now mature and consistently operate with fewer workers. But rural areas have other natural resources—bodies of water, mountains, valleys, and scenic landscapes—that today attract millions of leisure visitors and many new residents, thus creating more jobs in the process. The fact that many recreation areas also are retirement destinations underscores the capacity of climate and scenic amenities to attract people for permanent residence.

The implications of continuing growth in recreational areas are not all positive, particularly because these locations contain many environmentally sensitive areas. Water bodies, shore lines, wetlands, forests, and wildlife are likely to experience more environmental stress as the volume of human activity grows, especially where the physical features and fauna themselves are the objects sought for use or appreciation by the visitors and new residents. Some recreation counties began to be used for leisure purposes on a small scale in the 19th century, but—along with newer ones—have grown at an
accelerating pace in recent decades as affluence and leisure increase in a nation fast approaching 300 million people. Some nonmetro recreation counties had such growth in the 1990s that they now have urbanized areas of over 50,000 people and will be reclassified as metropolitan in 2003 (e.g., Prescott, AZ; Coeur d’Alene, ID; Bend, OR).

The growth in many recreation areas has occurred near and within forests, aggravating fire control problems (as witnessed prominently in the West in the summer of 2002). The rapid growth also complicates agricultural operations, puts additional pressure on riparian areas, impairs air quality, and can diminish the very amenities that initially attracted people. Yet in an era when hundreds of rural and small-town communities need to obtain new sources of income to counter the decline of farm, mine, and timber jobs and the loss of factory work overseas, the rising urban demand for rural recreation has become essential to the continued vitality of many places.

Therefore, when attempting to understand conditions and trends in nonmetro America, it is necessary to determine which counties have developed high dependence on recreation activity. The process of specifying recreation counties is unavoidably somewhat arbitrary because recreation occurs to some degree nearly everywhere. There are counties not on our list that have well-known recreational features. And other researchers might choose different procedures than we have. However, the consistently large population and migration gains evident over three varied decades in the counties we have delineated as recreational indicates the utility of our classification. As such, we believe it will be a useful tool for researchers and policymakers concerned with the welfare and course of change in rural and small-town America. RA

For Further Reading . . .


