

Natural Amenities Drive Rural Population Change. By David A. McGranahan, Food and Rural Economics Division, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. Agricultural Economic Report No. 781.

Abstract

Climate, topography, and water area are highly related to rural county population change over the past 25 years. A natural amenities index, derived and discussed here, captures much of this relationship. Average 1970-96 population change in nonmetropolitan counties was 1 percent among counties low on the natural amenities index and 120 percent among counties high on the index. Most retirement counties and recreation counties score in the top quarter of the amenities index. Employment change is also highly related to natural amenities, although more so over the past 25 years than in the current decade. The importance of particular amenities varies by region. In the Midwest, for example, people are drawn to lakes for recreation and retirement, while people are attracted to the West for its varied topography.

Keywords: natural amenities, population change, retirement, recreation

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Data tables for this report can be found at <http://www.econ.ag.gov/amenities>

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Summary

Population change in rural counties since 1970 has been strongly related to their attractiveness as places to live. Natural aspects of attractiveness can be summarized in three types of amenities: mild climate, varied topography, and proximity to surface water—ponds, lakes, and shoreline. Counties scoring high in a scale of these amenities had substantial population growth in the last 25 years. High-scoring counties tended to double their population, while the average gain for the low-scoring counties was only 1 percent, and over half lost population. Not all high-amenity counties had high growth, however.

Counties high in natural amenities and with strong population growth are found primarily in the West and Southwest, where the climate is mild, the topography varied, and lakes or the ocean are easily accessible. By contrast, many rural counties in the Midwest lack these amenities and have lost population in the past 25 years. County population change is more highly related to these natural amenities than to urban proximity, population density, or economic type, although these too play a role.

Natural amenities are related to an area's popularity for retirement or recreation. Nearly two-thirds of the nonmetro counties dependent on recreation industries and three-fourths of those classified as retirement destinations fall in the top quarter of counties in natural amenities. Recreation counties, however, are not necessarily attractive as places to live year-round. Although they do tend to have sunny winters, mild summers, mountains, and lakes or coastal settings, recreation counties are less characterized by warm winters than are areas of high population growth because the colder winters discourage year-round living.

The natural amenities index is related to population change across the country, but less so to population change within particular regions, such as the Midwest or Northeast. There are tiers of attraction for natural amenity areas. Some areas are attractive at the national level, drawing people from across the country—the Rocky Mountains or Florida, for example. Other areas have limited national attraction, but draw people from within the region for recreation and retirement—like the lake areas of the northern Midwest.

Employment change in rural counties over the past 25 years has also been highly related to natural amenities. Counties low on the scale had relatively little growth, while high-scoring counties had an average of three times as many new jobs in 1996 as in 1969. Employment change, however, varies across counties a great deal more than population change, particularly among higher-amenity counties. The accessibility of counties to recreational visitors is probably more critical for determining where employers go than where people move. County employment change has also been less related to warm county winters than has population change, probably because of the development of recreation industries in areas that are only seasonally attractive.