

Conclusion

Rural county population change—as well as the development of rural recreation and retirement-destination areas—are all highly related to natural amenities, much more so than to other locational measures such as the rural-urban continuum code. The index of natural amenities developed in this study can capture much of each of these relationships, but the index serves best as a summary of factors associated with broad shifts in U.S. population over the past 25 years. The characteristics attractive to vacationers are somewhat different from the characteristics associated with population movement. Moreover, within any region, the movement of population and the development of recreation areas may be associated with a somewhat different mix

of characteristics than found for the population change across the United States as a whole.

As noted in the introduction, this report considers only the basic ingredients of natural amenities, not how they have been shaped by nature and man. Land cover—the extent of land in crops, grass, or forest—also has a bearing on the attractiveness of an area. And land use regulation, including public parkland, national or State forests, and other designations, can at once make an area more attractive and stimulate growth while limiting its location. The shaping of amenities is what policy—and markets—can do. The challenge is to better understand how areas can best take advantage of the amenities they have.