

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Benewah County Beliefs, Attitudes, and Values:
A Survey of Benewah County Property Owners

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Overview

We find moderate support for the hypothesis that local and absentee property owners in Benewah County have different perceptions of the county and its communities. While similarities exist between locals and absentees in their beliefs and attitudes about the county as a whole, local owners are more concerned with socioeconomic issues and exhibit higher levels of attachment to the county. And while locals and absentees tend to support active resource management and oppose increasing residential development in certain areas, they differ in their opinions about the acceptability of land use regulation as a method for achieving environmental quality goals.

Objectives

The inland Northwest continues to undergo demographic and socioeconomic change as exemplified by rapid population growth and residential development in amenity rich regions. Our objective is to describe the beliefs, attitudes, and values of property owners related to three counties in northern Idaho and northeastern Oregon, their landscapes, and communities. In the context of residential development and socioeconomic change in the region, we test the hypothesis that local and absentee property owners have different perceptions of the meanings and significance of the counties. This summary and the associated technical report detail the results from Benewah County, Idaho.

Methods

We randomly selected a list of 380 property owners from a sample frame of property tax payers. Property owners were stratified by the zip code on their property tax bill mailing address in order to ensure that an adequate number of local and absentee property owners were contacted. A mail survey was developed and implemented following Dillman's (2000) Tailored Design Method. A total of 171 questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 49% when ineligible property owners and undeliverable questionnaires were factored out of the total sample. A check for non-response bias indicated that 171 respondents are reasonably representative of the overall population of property owners.

Results

Results from the questionnaire were divided into five sections: demographics, the county, communities, natural resource value-orientations, and land use and management scenarios. Demographically, locals and absentees differ substantially. Locals tend to be year round residents who have spent on average more than 30 years in the County, while many absentees have never lived in the county and most spend less than one month per year there. The largest sector of employment among locals is in natural resource-based careers, while absentees tend to be employed in medicine, law, or other professions that require advanced

education and garner higher incomes. Locals appear to be socially and culturally tied to the county, while absentee owners may be tied to the county through a recreation property, vacation or second home.

Benewah County embodies similar meanings to absentee and local property owners, who agree most strongly with the beliefs that the County is a place of escape, independence, and inspiration. Similarly there are few differences in attitudes about the County. While on average attitudes about the socio-economic state of the County are relatively neutral, it is notable that all respondents tend to have positive attitudes about the County's natural resource base, specifically access to natural resources, scenery, sportsman opportunities, and forest health. Where locals and absentees tend to differ is in their attachment to the county, which was measured on a five item scale of emotional bonding to the County. Locals exhibit significantly higher levels of attachment than absentees. Furthermore, attachment to Benewah County is strongly related to length of residence (i.e., people who have lived in Benewah County longest, tend to have the highest levels of attachment). This finding is regardless of current place of residence indicating that strong attachments to the County can endure the distances of time and space.

Local and absentee property owners identify with the same communities indicating that there is no community that tends to attract more locals or absentees. One large difference exists in the percentage of absentees who do not identify with any community in the County. While all locals identified a community to which they feel a part, 20% of absentees report that they feel a part of no community. Among those property owners who do identify with a community the presence of wildlife, opportunities for recreation, and other features of the natural setting of communities are consistently rated as the most important traits of communities in the County. While social traits such as family ties, the presence of friends, and local culture tend to be less important than the natural setting of the community, locals generally find social features of the community as more important than absentees. Complimenting the importance of the natural setting of communities, all owners tend to be most satisfied with the recreational opportunities near their community, while satisfaction with employment, commerce and community governance is neutral. With few exceptions, locals exhibit higher levels of involvement in all types of community groups, and overall involvement tends to be with either groups oriented towards natural resource production and conservation or socio-economic planning and development.

Benewah County property owners exhibit a stewardship ethic with regards to their values-orientation towards natural resources. All owners tended to agree with values that support the active management of resources, while simultaneously agreeing with the value of the natural world independent of people. The combination of strong agreement with the utilitarian and intrinsic values of the natural world suggests a stewardship quality in the values of Benewah County property owners.

Finally, respondents were asked to rate the likelihood that they would support or oppose specific land use and natural resource management scenarios. The scenarios included increased forest thinning by the USFS under the Healthy Forest Initiative, rapid increases in residential development along the St. Joe River, and increased riparian land use regulations to improve water quality in the County. Generally locals and absentees alike responded overwhelming with support for forest thinning; uncertainty is also lowest for this scenario. Second, residential development along the St. Joe River is generally opposed with only 10%

of respondents in favor of future development along the river. Last, locals and absentees disagree on whether to support or oppose riparian land use regulations. Locals oppose the scenario over 2:1, while absentees support the scenario by nearly 3:1. Responses confirm that active management of natural resources in the County is supported by property owners, while changes in land use and regulation should be approached with measured caution.

Conclusion

We find moderate support for the hypothesis that local and absentee property owners perceive the County in different ways. This is especially reflected in levels of attachment to the County, with locals and long time residents exhibiting significantly stronger attachment than absentee and newer residents, respectively. More generally, we find that Benewah County is a place of escape, independence, and inspiration. Attitudes about the County and its communities tend to be positive and strongest towards its natural amenities and resources, and somewhat neutral towards socio-economic factors. Values towards natural resources reflect a stewardship orientation rather than either the extreme of heavy resource development or strong protectionism, and responses to natural resource management and land use scenarios reflect this stewardship orientation. Demographic and socio-economic change in Benewah County will likely continue as nearby metropolitan centers continue to grow. Understanding the impacts of those changes on the beliefs, attitudes, and values of people tied to the county can help local officials and community leaders to strategize ways to deal with those changes that maintain the basis for the County's sense of place. In doing so, we recommend focusing on the sound stewardship of natural resources and the idea of Benewah County as a place of inspiration, independence, and escape.

Reference

Dillman, D.A. 2000. Mail and internet surveys: the tailored design method. John Wiley & Sons, New York.