

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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Overview

We find support for the hypothesis that local and absentee property owners in Wallowa County have different perceptions of the county and its communities. Although some similarities exist in their beliefs and attitudes about the County, the differences are instructive. Local owners focus more on the significance of the County as a place of strong communities and families, while absentee owners see the Wallowa County more as a place of escape from the rest of the world. Differences also exist in attitudes about the County's economy, the state of employment, the affordability of the land and housing market, and forest health. These differences and others manifest prominently in the opinions on a number of land use and management scenarios. While all owners tend to be opposed to increased residential development around Wallowa Lake, locals and absentees differ significantly in their levels of support and opposition for forest thinning and additional wilderness designation.

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 Wallowa County, Oregon.

Methods

We randomly selected a list of 989 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 479 questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 56% when ineligible property owners and undeliverable questionnaires were factored out of the total sample. A check for non-response bias indicated that 479 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 most absentees have never lived in the county and most spend less than one month per year there. The largest sectors of employment among locals are natural resource-based and service-based careers, while absentees tend to be employed in professions that require advanced education and garner higher incomes. Locals appear to be socially and culturally tied to the county, while absentee owners are more likely to be tied to the county through a recreation property, vacation or second home.

Wallowa County embodies different meanings to absentee and local property owners. While locals focus on the strength of communities and families, absentees tend to focus on the County as a place to escape the rest of the world. All owners strongly agree that Wallowa County is a place worth making sacrifices for, a place of historical importance, and a place of an inspiring landscape. A number of important differences also exist in attitudes about the County. Absentees tend to evaluate the state of the local economy and employment better than locals. While locals evaluate the state of forest health and the local housing and land market worse than absentees. Locals and absentees also tend to differ 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; however, it is important to note that attachment to Wallowa County is high among all property owners. Furthermore, attachment to Wallowa County is strongly related to length of residence (i.e., people who have lived in Wallowa 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 different communities in the County indicating that there is both selection and avoidance of certain communities. For example, nearly 45% of absentees select Joseph as the community they feel most a part of (compared to only 26% of locals) and they also tend to avoid selecting Enterprise or Wallowa. Among those property owners who do identify with a community the surrounding landscape and scenery, the presence of wildlife, and opportunities for recreation 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 their social ties to the communities, the recreational opportunities near their community, and the character of their communities. Satisfaction with employment, commerce and community governance is neutral to negative. 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.

Local property owners tend to exhibit a natural resource values-orientation tilted more towards resource production than absentee owners. In general all owners tended to agree most with values statements that reflect the benefits of good stewardship to both humans and the environment, while simultaneously agreeing with the inherent value of the natural world and values based on active management of resources. The combination of strong agreement with the utilitarian, altruistic, and intrinsic values of the natural world suggests a stewardship quality in the values of all Wallowa 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 residential development along Wallowa Lake, increased forest thinning by the USFS under the Healthy Forest Initiative, and the designation of more wilderness area within the County. Locals and absentees responded with more than 2:1 opposition to increased development near Wallowa Lake. With respect to the forest thinning and wilderness designation scenarios, however, locals and absentees disagree. While locals support thinning nearly 6:1, significantly fewer absentees (less than half) were likely to support forest thinning, and as many were uncertain about how they would respond to the scenario. Last, while locals oppose new wilderness designation in the county nearly 3:1, more absentees support than are opposed to additional wilderness designation. Responses confirm that Wallowa County holds different meanings to local and absentee owners. Local property owners are more supportive of active management of natural resources, while absentees appear more tend to be more protectionist. That nearly 80% of all respondents are either uncertain or opposed to land use change around Wallowa Lake supports a measured approach to future changes in the lake setting, and land use changes more generally.

Conclusion

These results lend support to the hypothesis that local and absentee owners have different perceive the County in different ways. While all owners agree that Wallowa County is a place of historical importance, tradition, sacrifice, and an inspiring landscape, support for the hypothesis is especially reflected in the fact that to locals Wallowa County is more a place of strength for communities and families, and to absentees Wallowa County is more a place of escape from the rest of the world. There are also differences in attitudes about the County and attachment to it, with locals and long time residents exhibiting significantly stronger attachment than absentee and newer residents, respectively, even in the face of negative attitudes about the local economy. Absentees tend to identify more strongly with specific communities (e.g., Joseph), while avoiding identification with Enterprise and Wallowa. Attitudes about the 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 that is tilted slightly towards resource development among local property owners. Differences are also evident in the responses to natural resource management and land use scenarios, which reflect the values-orientation and attitudes of the two groups. Demographic and socio-economic change in Wallowa County will likely continue as the County follows broader regional trends. 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 perceptions that are common among local and absentee owners, such as the shared meanings of historical importance, sacrifice, and inspiration, as well as the importance of the County's natural resources to its culture and history. While the differences can not be ignored, focusing on shared beliefs and values can act as a bridge to the discourse of difference.

Reference

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