

Rise of sexual predators in energy boomtowns highlights social problems

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Research into the social and environmental effects on communities that are economically dependent on oil and gas industries has revealed "social dysfunction and biological impoverishment." The research, published in *Conservation Biology*, revealed that over a nine year period the number of registered sex offenders in energy 'boomtowns' was two to three times higher than towns dependent on other industries.

The research, carried out by Dr Joel Berger and Dr Jon P. Beckmann, analysed communities in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) in Wyoming USA, an area often referred to as the largest intact ecosystem in Earth's temperate zone. Many towns across the area are dependent on energy extraction, while others are dependent on agriculture and tourism. The authors assessed whether social and environmental issues are related to the industries that dominate these boomtowns.

"In the past few years it has become clear that the development of wide-scale energy projects takes both social and environmental tolls," said Berger from the University of Montana and Wildlife Conservation Society. "Our research identified societal markers to reveal the negative elements associated with changing human economies and to gauge changes in both community composition and services. One of these markers was the increase in sexual predators."

Through nine local county attorney's offices the authors were able to study the number of registered sexual offenders, defined as convicted felons that are required by law to register with legal authorities, across

the Greater Yellowstone area.

The research revealed that over a nine year period the number of sexual offenders grew by two to three times more in areas dependent on oil extraction than in similar areas dependent on agriculture or tourism.

In 2008 there were 300% more sexual offenders in the GYE than in 1997 when the US Sex Offenders Registry became law. The number of sex offenders increased most rapidly in counties dominated by oil and gas extraction.

"The absolute and relative frequency of registered sexual offenders grew faster in areas reliant on energy extraction," Berger confirmed. "This is a severe symptom of the social problems faced by these communities. These problems, coupled with a parallel rise in ecological destruction, fit a pattern which has been reflected consistently around energy boomtowns from Ecuador to northern Canada."

"This is not to say that the arrival of the energy industry into a community directly leads to sexual predation. Rather it is symptomatic of wider social and economic issues which communities face when they become dependent on the rise and fall of these industries," said Beckmann from the Wildlife Conservation Society. "Our findings underscore an increase in sexual predators as a result of the dramatic social upheaval caused when a large influx of people are attracted to energy boomtowns due to high rates of employment and high salaries."

Other symptoms of social change seen in energy boomtowns across the western United States include the use of illicit drugs, domestic violence, wildlife poaching and a general rise in crime. The research suggests that these changes occur because of the differences between the traditional rural residents and the incoming workforce.

The link between these social issues and environmental change has led to the rise of unlikely alliances as social advocates and state agencies have banded together across the area to conserve the potential for traditional rural lifestyles.

"Our findings suggest that the public and industry need stronger regulatory action to instil greater vigilance in areas which face ecological, economic and social problems, due to dependence on the energy industry," concluded Berger.

Provided by Wiley

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