

# **New research shows why some communities embrace environmental conservation and others don't**

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Continued support for off-shore oil drilling by Gulf Coast residents who are dealing with one of the most devastating environmental disasters in U.S. history might seem surprising, but new research from the University of New Hampshire shows that local factors such as unemployment and population growth influence views about the value of environmental conservation and regulation.

The research is presented in the most recent issue of the journal *Rural Sociology* in the article "Place Effects on Environmental Views."

"Our research shows that people who live in rural areas with high unemployment rates are less likely to support environmental regulations. Economic pressures help to understand why, in spite of the devastation caused by the BP oil spill, many residents of the Gulf Coast oppose a moratorium on off-shore drilling," said Larry Hamilton, professor of sociology, senior fellow at the Carsey Institute at UNH, and lead author of the study. The study is co-authored by Chris Colocousis, assistant professor at James Madison University, and Mil Duncan, director of the Carsey Institute at UNH.

Researchers surveyed more than 7,800 people in 19 rural counties of nine states. The states consisted of seven geographic regions -- the Rocky Mountains, Pacific Northwest, Northeast, Midwestern farm country, Appalachia, [Mississippi Delta](#), and Alabama's Black Belt - that

represented four broad types of rural places characterized by resource and population decline, amenity-driven population growth, amenity-driven population growth and decline, and chronic poverty.

People in rural areas with high unemployment rates are less likely to support conservation efforts and restrictive environmental regulations, the researchers found. "People living in areas with high unemployment rates may perceive environmental rules as a threat to their economic livelihood," Hamilton said.

People in rural areas with high rates of population growth are more likely to support conservation efforts and environmental regulations. "In such places, population change could be altering the environment in visible ways and make it seem more in need of protection," Hamilton explained.

Looking at other factors that influence views on conservation, the researchers confirmed classic patterns that show that Republicans, older respondents, and those who frequently attend religious services are less likely to favor conservation for future generations. Women, nonminority, and better-educated respondents are more likely to favor conservation.

Similar to views on conservation, the researchers confirmed previous research that shows environmental regulations are supported more by younger, better educated, and less Republican respondents.

Despite the results, the researchers say that rural areas do not adhere to one model and vary in countless respects besides rates of [population growth](#) and unemployment. Understanding the views of people in specific areas must take into consideration the shared context of a particular area.

"For example, in our Rocky Mountain counties, the growing economy based on recreation and natural amenities gives people less reason to perceive conflict between jobs and conservation. In Appalachia, on the other hand, coal mining interests have cast debates over mountaintop-removal mining as a choice between jobs and [conservation](#)," Hamilton says.

Provided by University of New Hampshire

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