

Does owning a well foster environmental citizenship? A new study provides evidence

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Kansans who own water wells show more awareness of state water policy issues than those who rely on municipal water supplies, according to a study that could have implications for groundwater management and environmental policies.

Brock Ternes, a University of Kansas doctoral student in sociology, found that well owners prioritized issues related to the depletion of the High Plains Aquifer—which is the underground reservoir of freshwater beneath much of the western half of the state.

Based on a survey he conducted of 864 Kansans, Ternes discovered that well owners were significantly more aware of [water](#) supplies and water-related policies and agencies, including the Kansas Water Office, Groundwater Management Districts, and the Governor's Long-Term Vision for the Future of Water Supply in Kansas.

"The people who use private wells for water are more likely to hear about water-related policy issues and pay attention to them," said Ternes, who will present his study at the 111th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA).

For example, he found that well owners also tended to be more aware of the Kansas Aqueduct proposal, an \$18 billion undertaking that would divert water from the Missouri River to western Kansas. Non-well owners were less familiar with this enormous waterworks project.

Like so many regions suffering from recent droughts, rural Kansas has been particularly hard-hit by the scarcity of water. The High Plains Aquifer has been over-pumped for its valuable irrigation water, and researchers estimate that unless pumping is curtailed, the aquifer will no longer support irrigation wells in portions of southwestern Kansas within 25 years, Ternes said.

"Sociological studies are imperative for understanding the mindsets of well owners, who are a distinct group of Kansans who will continue to influence the availability of groundwater," Ternes said.

As part of his survey, Ternes found that private well owners highly prioritize conserving water for the future.

"Most well owners believe securing water is one of the top political challenges facing Kansas, and water policies are more likely to influence their vote in local and state elections than Kansans who don't own wells," said Ternes. In this study, he coins the term "groundwater citizenship," which emphasizes the stewardship of aquifers and deliberate water conservation in order to conserve supplies of groundwater.

"My data suggest that well owners have different political priorities than non-well owners and conserve water with the hopes of extending their supply, which makes them a unique type of citizen," he said.

This research could be valuable for policymakers and water officials in Kansas as they seek to examine possible solutions for protecting the High Plains Aquifer. If they understand the importance of engaging well owners who are passionate about these issues, it can help bring water conservation more to the public forefront.

"Water supply infrastructure is clearly connected to how in-tune people are with their natural resources, which is profoundly important for

environmental policymaking and survival in the Anthropocene," Ternes said.

The study has broader implications for environmental stewardship as many states grapple with vulnerability to drought, he added.

"Technologies might grant us access to natural resources and make them seem more readily available when they are in reality much more scarce," Ternes said. "This is why we need to analyze the systems that provide access to finite resources like water."

The paper, "'Groundwater Citizenship' and Water Supply Awareness: Investigating Water-Related Infrastructure, the Kansas Aqueduct, and Well Ownership," will be presented on Monday, Aug. 22, in Seattle at the American Sociological Association's 111th Annual Meeting.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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