Destination regions are created when people move into rural communities, motivated by access to natural amenities such as lakes and forests. The resulting increase in the number of seasonal, recreational, and occasional use homes has a host of both benefits and drawbacks for the communities in which they are built.

How does the development and ownership of these recreation homes change rural communities? How can communities that are gateways to natural and built amenities address the social, economic, political, and environmental issues created by recreation home development?

This series of fact sheets aims to help community and regional planners, housing developers and builders, Extension educators, and elected officials better understand the changing landscapes of amenity-rich rural regions. This specific overview identifies the U.S. regions of the lower 48 states with high concentrations of recreation housing (by percentage of total housing units, data taken from 2010 U.S. Census).

Research plays an important role in the development of recreation homes and the resulting impacts on rural communities. This role is becoming more apparent in rural communities across the United States, including the Great Lakes States. However, research remains largely unacknowledged or overlooked as an important aspect of planning, tourism, and migration. To help manage these impacts, this overview also offers recommendations for the management of destination regions.

Where are U.S. recreation homes located?

Several distinct concentrations of recreation homes in the United States become apparent when they are represented graphically by county (see map).

- The Great Lakes region, including Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, has a large natural resource base of natural forests and lakes. Water-based recreation activities are common.

Regions with high concentrations of recreation housing
The Northeast states have both a high concentration of natural resources and proximity to urban populations. Haphazard and uncontrolled development due to lax development regulations occurs in the region.

The Intermountain West, stretching from Montana down to Arizona, is rich in national parks, forests, and refuges. The region offers scenic views and an abundance of mountains, open space, and opportunities for recreation. Changing land use puts pressure on existing natural resources, often causing conflicts.

Concentrations of seasonal homes surround the amenity-rich Lake Tahoe area of eastern California.

Recreation homes come in all types and sizes; there is no standard definition. Common types include small houses and cottages, hunting shacks, trailers, ski chalets, and four-season showcase homes.

Owners of recreation homes tend to be wealthy, highly educated, retired or employed in white-collar jobs, and from urban areas. Most owners of recreation homes use their recreation home on only a part-time basis and are not permanent residents of the area. Motivations for purchasing a recreation home include having a permanent getaway location, quality time and togetherness with family, investment and possible rental income, and social status. In addition, many owners of recreation homes are motivated by the desire to be closer to nature and to enjoy a rural escape.

The counter- and exurbanization process, or movement of people to regions outside of cities and beyond their suburbs, is driven by “frontier seekers” in pursuit of inexpensive, unregulated land with natural amenities. Current land use planning inappropriately applies urban planning tools to address issues specific to rural areas. This results in continual unplanned expansion, increased social and political tensions between the “haves” and “have nots,” and segregated residential development in sensitive and easily degradable areas.

In place of urban planning tools, rural areas need creative approaches to land use changes specific to destination regions. They also require public policies and programs sensitive to unique rural conditions.
Development
Research suggests that recreation homes are viewed as an important source of retail and service sector demands and local property tax revenue. They also place limited demands on public services, specifically access, security, and healthcare. Income opportunities resulting from recreation homes tend to create employment of widely varying quality. This is particularly true for retirement migrants as the new locale now serves as the recipient location for a large share of pensions, social security income, and investments.

Important social issues surrounding the development of recreation homes include income inequality, residential segregation, social exclusion, and environmental justice.

Natural resources
Natural resources provide the basis for the natural amenities that people enjoy. Continual demand for development in destination regions requires resource management to be sensitive to both extractive uses of natural resources and non-extractive uses of natural amenities. Recreation sites are a non-extractive use and provide public access to natural amenities. This public access typically allows for a variety of recreation activities, and the compatibility of these activities reflects a range of use interactions and management approaches. Recreation activities interact in one of three ways:

- Competitive and antagonistic uses require approaches to segregating uses.
- Supplementary uses require approaches mindful of uses.
- Complementary uses require approaches to capture opportunities.

As recreation congestion grows, so do recreational user conflicts.

Impacts of recreation homes
Recreation homes commonly have a strong impact on the existing economic, social, and housing systems of the destination regions in which they are built.

Economic
Effects of recreation home development on the regional economy are both positive and negative:

- Increased low-wage, seasonal, and part-time jobs
- Increased entrepreneurial and small business opportunities
- Further development of infrastructure
- Displaced permanent residents
- Increased demands and pressures within the local rental industry and related jobs and income

Social
As owners of recreation homes become stronger stakeholders in the community, their voices and opinions become a more integral part of community discussions, often leading to tensions within rural communities. Permanent residents and owners of recreation homes commonly have varying perceptions and attitudes regarding the environment, community growth and change, and economic development and dependence on tourism.

Housing
The development of recreation homes and cycles of ownership have unique impacts on the housing in rural areas. Some common effects include:

- Increased housing costs and resulting property taxes
- Vacated homes purchased and controlled by non-residents
- Conversion of vacated homes into recreation homes, leading to depopulation
- Conversion of recreation homes to year-round retirement homes, increasing the proportion of older residents in the community
- Alteration of the “rural character” of the community with development of suburban-like subdivisions or multifamily housing such as condominiums, timeshares, and rental units

Conclusions
Recreation homes comprise a significant amount of the housing stock in destination regions. The use, maintenance, and improvement of these homes for leisure purposes helps explain the developmental context of these rural regions. This developmental context has social, environmental, and economic effects on permanent and part-time residents, entrepreneurs, labor pools, local decision-making, and natural resource endowments.

Planning and public policies that address key needs of destination regions require a firm understanding of the developmental consequences brought forward by the presence of recreation homes, their owners, and related leisure activities.

For more information
To learn more, see the extended version of this fact sheet, which examines research on the development of recreation homes throughout the world and discusses the role this type of development plays in changing the economic, social, and environmental makeup of rural communities. It is available at http://urpl.wisc.edu/people/marcouiller/publications/10errechomes.pdf.