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## Keeping our Charm: Residents, Growth, and Quality of Life Issues in a Small but Growing Texas Coastal Community

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**Abstract:** The study reported here assessed residents' perception of small, fast-growing coastal community on issues of quality of life, conservation, and growth. Data for the study were collected from an on-site survey in Aransas County, Texas from 2006 to 2007. Results show that the residents are concerned about preserving their natural resources, maintaining a small town atmosphere in their community, and ensuring citizens' involvement in future planning efforts, especially with tourism. The implications of the study are discussed for Extension professionals and residents, suggestions for future research are provided.

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In many parts of the United States, coastal regions and their communities are being transformed in response to population growth, urbanization, and tourism. Tourism development and growth provide economic

opportunities for local residents and businesses but may potentially have negative effects, including reduced open space, traffic congestion, loss of community identity, and displacement of residences (Freudenburg, Bacigalupi, & Young, 1982; Salamon, 2003). Consequently, local government and community leaders must become more aware of residents' concerns and attitudes to balance economic development and tourism with overall quality of life and environmental conservation.

In this article, we report on the results of a study examining residents' attitudes toward growth and quality of life. Study objectives are: 1) to assess perceived concerns and attitudes toward growth, quality of life issues, and natural resource conservation; 2) to compare citizens' attitudes and concerns by length of residence; and 3) to discuss the implications of growth on the quality of life for residents of coastal communities.

## Literature Review

It has been widely accepted that long-term sustainable tourism development in coastal areas could be jeopardized if the needs and attitudes of local residents are not sufficiently met (Smith & Krannich, 2000; Zacharakis, 2006). Research demonstrates that residents in coastal communities can hold negative attitudes toward tourism development (Teye, Sirakaya, & Sonmez 2002). Population growth and tourism development have been a widespread concern, especially in coastal areas of Texas (Ahn, Lee, & Shafer, 2002). Tourism development can be linked to many challenges to coastal areas, including seasonal population increases, lack of infrastructure, and urban sprawl (Murray, 2007). If coastal communities are to maintain community character and the sustained use of natural resources, they will have to balance existing economic activity, e.g., commercial fishing, oil and gas production, and seafood processing, with the needs of residents and tourism businesses (Adams, Hernandez, & Cato, 2004).

McAndrews and Draper (2006) argued that residents' conflicts over growth and tourism development in communities rich in natural amenities is actually a disagreement over quality of life values. Quality of life is considered an essential component in community development. Bell's work (1992) identified a number of environmental qualities important to quality of life for rural residents, including distinctiveness of the countryside, closeness to natural beauty, aesthetic beauty of the environment, and smallness of scale. On the community level, quality of life is tied to socio-environmental conditions, including economic activity, environmental health, and cultural equality (McAndrews & Draper, 2006).

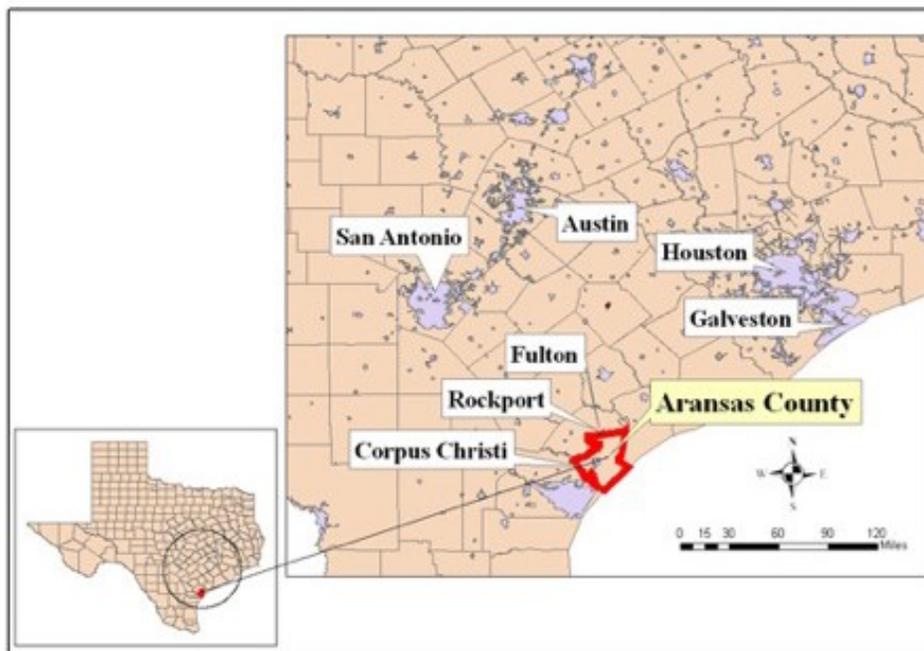
## Method

### Location

Data used in the study reported here were collected from a survey of Aransas County residents in Texas. This coastal county is located on the Gulf of Mexico near Corpus Christi (Figure 1). The geographic area provided an important case study because it possesses rich coastal resources for tourism development. Aransas County is adjacent to major metropolitan cities, such as Houston and San Antonio, and coastal communities, such as Corpus Christi, Galveston, and South Padre Island.

Aransas County is also experiencing rapid population and economic growth. Total population in the surrounding areas exceeds 5 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). The per capita personal income in Aransas County was \$25,094 in 2002, which increased 21.2% from 1997. The estimated population in 2006 was 24,831, an increase of 38% since 1990. The county population contained 72% White, 22% Hispanic or Latino, 3% Asian, and 2% African American in 2005 (US Census Bureau, 2007). Local business includes seafood, oil production, tourism, sport hunting and fishing, boating, and water sports.

**Figure 1.**  
Geographical Location of Arkansas County, Texas



## Data Collection

Data for the study were collected from several sources in spring 2006 and summer 2007. Participants at the Sea Fair festival and the Oyster festival in Arkansas County were approached by interviewers and asked to participate in a research study. Questionnaires (written in English) were completed on-site. In addition, other community members were asked to participate in the same study at specific local meetings, i.e., Chamber of Commerce Board, Rotary Club, and Master Gardeners.

## Questionnaire Construction

The questionnaire was constructed using multiple sources, including relevant literature, the Texas Community Futures Forum, and expertise from the principal investigators and county Extension agents.

The main part of the questionnaire contained items to assess participants' attitudes towards growth and quality of life. Respondents were asked to rate the level of agreement of each statement on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (5) to strongly agree (1). The Likert scale best allows the researcher to obtain information along a continuum in assessing information on attitudes (Bernard, 2000). These attitude items were developed from several sources. First, research on place meaning provided the theoretical foundation for these items. Physical spaces become "places" when they are imbued with meanings (Tuan, 1974). It has been recognized that places are not only centers for social interaction, services, consumption, and experiences, but also defined by a user's identity (Manzo, 2005; Snepenger, Murphy, Snepenger, & Anderson, 2004).

The items included in the questionnaire incorporated multiple dimensions of place meaning from the local perspective: community identity and vision, consumption and services, quality of life, e.g., walkability, livability, recreation, and social interaction (Bengston, Potts, Fan, & Goetz, 2005; Fenton, 2005; Green, Marcouiller, Deller, Erkkila, & Sumathi, 1996; Kang & Kwak, 2003).

Items were selected from local issues and concerns expressed from the Texas Community Futures Forum (TCFF), a statewide assessment conducted in each county by Texas Cooperative Extension in 2004. The Futures Forum elicited input from county residents on what they perceived to be the most important issues affecting Aransas County. The most salient issue from this activity was the effect that rapid population growth might have on "coastal charm," which was perceived to be an important local amenity. The questionnaire also contained items measuring outdoor recreation activity participation and socio-demographic characteristics.

## Results

### Respondents' Profile

From the contacts made during the survey process, there were a total of 1,540 usable questionnaires. For the purpose of the study, only local residents (full-time and part-time) were included in the data analysis (n=923). Part-time residence status was determined by the respondent's self-report. Of the respondents, 68% were full-time residents, and 32% were part-time residents. The majority of the residents were female (58%), with a slight majority between 47 and 67 years of age (52%), some college/technical school (31%), and mostly White (87%). Over 60% of the residents had annual family incomes of \$50,000 or more (Table 1).

The majority had lived in the county less than 5 years (59%), and 11% lived more than 15 years in the county. Just over 30% of the respondents work in the County. Of all full-time residents, almost 45% had jobs in the county, while only about 4% of part-time residents worked in Aransas County. Thirty-five percent received a retirement pension. Eighty-five percent of the residents participated in outdoor activities such as fishing, walking/hiking, and wildlife viewing.

Compared to the most recent Census data for the County (U.S. Census, 2007), the survey respondents showed similar socio-demographic characteristics in age and gender distribution but exhibited slightly higher income and education than the average Aransas County residents. The sample contained a lower proportion of Hispanic individuals as well.

**Table 1.**  
Socio-Demographic Profile of Residents

Resident Variables	N	Percentage	U.S. Census
<b>Age</b>			
18-24	44	5%	6%
25-34	72	8%	9%
35-44	99	12%	14%
45-64	430	50%	27%
> 65	208	24%	20%
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	370	42%	50%
Female	518	58%	50%

<b>Education</b>			
Less than high school	40	4%	25%
High school diploma	176	19%	29%
Some college/technical school	291	32%	24%
University graduate	260	28%	15%
Graduate degree	148	16%	6%
<b>Household income</b>			
Under \$15,000	26	3%	24%
\$15,000 to \$30,000	90	11%	24%
\$30,001 to \$50,000	190	23%	22%
\$50,001 to \$75,000	195	24%	15%
\$75,001 to \$100,000	144	17%	7%
> \$100,000	184	22%	8%
<b>Race and ethnicity</b>			
White	794	87%	87%
African American	9	1%	1%
Hispanic	60	7%	20%
Asian	9	1%	3%
Native American	8	1%	1%
Others	28	1%	5%
Note: The total numbers of demographic variables do not add up to 923 due to missing data.			

## Attitudes About Growth and Quality of Life

Table 2 shows the mean scores on the items pertaining to growth and quality of life for full- and part-time residents (1=Strongly Disagree, and 5=Strongly Agree). Overall, respondents agreed that growth and the future of their environment are important to them. Specifically, respondents felt that citizens should play a role in guiding the character of future growth (4.4), liked the small town feel of downtown Rockport and Fulton (4.3), recognized that tourism is likely to remain the mainstay of the Aransas economy (4.3), and felt strongly about preserving its windswept oaks (4.4) and other natural areas such as oak motts, wetlands, and prairies (4.3). Residents also felt that they lived close enough to local stores (2.5), did not prefer to shop at large chain retailers (2.5), and did not agree that seeing their neighbors less is better (2.0).

Several significant differences were also found in comparing full- and part-time residents (Table 2). For example, part-time residents felt more strongly that Aransas County had adapted well to new arrivals over the last 20 years, had stronger positive feelings about the small town feel of Rockport and Fulton, and were

more willing to pay slightly more in taxes to preserve natural areas.

**Table 2.**  
Mean Scores and t-test Results for Growth and Quality of Life Items for Full- and Part-Time Residents

Statement	Mean <sup>1</sup> Over All	SD	Mean Full-Time	Mean Part-Time
Population growth has had a positive effect on the character of our community	3.5	1.2	3.4	3.5
Aransas County has adapted well to the arrival of new people over the last 20 years	3.5	1.0	3.4*	3.7
Aransas County needs growth in order to prosper	3.5	1.3	3.5	3.5
City and county government should play a role in guiding the character of future growth	4.0	1.0	4.0	4.0
Citizens and citizen groups should play a role in guiding the character of future growth	4.4	0.8	4.4	4.4
Tourism is likely to remain the mainstay of the Aransas County economy	4.3	0.9	4.3	4.3
Seeing and interacting frequently with neighbors is important to me	4.0	1.0	4.0	4.1
I live close enough to walk to local stores	2.5	1.4	2.5*	2.7
I would like to be able to drive less and walk more	3.4	1.2	3.4	3.5
The less I see my neighbors the better	2.0	1.2	2.0	2.1
I like the small town feel of downtown Rockport and Fulton	4.4	1.0	4.3*	4.5
I prefer to shop at a large chain retailer rather than small local stores	2.5	1.2	2.5*	2.3
Interesting shopping is important in a tourism-based economy	4.2	1.0	4.2	4.1
I enjoy purchasing fresh seafood from local boats and docks	4.2	1.0	4.2*	4.4
	3.0	1.4	3.0	3.1

I would be willing to give up some yard space in return for more walkable neighborhood and closer proximity to shops and retail				
It is important to preserve the remaining areas of windswept oaks	4.4	0.9	4.4*	4.5
I will be willing to endure a slight increase in taxes to preserve important remaining natural areas	3.2	1.3	3.1*	3.3
There are already enough natural areas preserved in Aransas County to ensure my grandchildren enjoy the same natural environment as I do	2.6	1.3	2.6	2.6
Natural areas, such as oak motts, floodplains, wetlands, and prairies are important to the economy of Aransas	4.3	1.0	4.2	4.3
*Significant differences in the mean scores using independent t-tests between full-time and part-time residents (p<.05). <sup>1</sup> Strongly Disagree=1, Strongly Agree=5.				

Given the fact the Aransas County has seen so much growth in the last decade, we explored the relationship between length of residence and attitudes toward growth using Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA). Residents were categorized into five groups by length of residence: less than 1 year, 1 to 5 years, 6 to 10 years, 11 to 15 years, and more than 15 years. In the analysis, significant differences were found between these groups (Wilks' Lambda F=1.863, p=.000).

In exploring these differences using MANOVA, the post-hoc results showed that residents who lived in Aransas County the longest (more than 15 years) had much different attitudes than more recent residents. For example, the longer-term residents had less desire for community growth than 1-5 year or 6-10 year resident groups. The longer-term residents also felt that they should rely less on government to guide future development than the 1-5 year resident groups. Longer-term residents were also less active in communicating with neighbors and less willing to drive less and walk more than 0-1 year and 1-5 year groups. On the other hand, longer-term residents were more concerned about the sustainability of natural resources and open space and more willing to endure a slight increase in taxes to preserve important remaining natural areas than any other group.

**Table 3.**  
MANOVA and Post-Hoc Results for Growth, Quality of Life, and Length of Residence Items

Items	Length of Residence						
	F	Sig	<1 year	1-5 years	6-10 years	11-15 years	>15 years
Percentage in total sample			27%	32%	17%	13%	11%

Aransas County needs growth in order to prosper <sup>1</sup>	3.92	.004	3.50	3.69 <sup>a</sup>	3.64 <sup>b</sup>	3.34	3.08 <sup>ab</sup>
City and county government should play a role in guiding the character of future growth	2.83	.024	3.97	4.19 <sup>a</sup>	4.02	3.99	3.77 <sup>a</sup>
Seeing and interacting frequently with neighbors is important to me	4.07	.003	4.08 <sup>a</sup>	4.16 <sup>b</sup>	3.92	3.89	3.70 <sup>ab</sup>
I would like to be able to drive less and walk more	3.06	.016	3.40 <sup>a</sup>	3.49 <sup>b</sup>	3.32	3.39	2.92 <sup>ab</sup>
The less I see my neighbors the better	4.40	.002	1.84 <sup>a</sup>	1.98 <sup>b</sup>	2.02	2.12	2.49 <sup>ab</sup>
I will be willing to endure a slight increase in taxes to preserve important remaining natural areas	4.10	.003	3.30	3.03	2.97 <sup>a</sup>	2.83 <sup>b</sup>	3.51 <sup>ab</sup>
There are already enough natural areas preserved in Aransas County to ensure my grandchildren enjoy the same natural environment as I do	2.71	.029	2.58	2.80 <sup>a</sup>	2.62	2.72	2.27 <sup>a</sup>
Population growth has had a positive effect on the character of our community	.81	.519	3.49	3.55	3.40	3.48	3.30
Aransas County has adapted well to the arrival of new people over the last 20 years	.67	.614	3.38	3.46	3.39	3.51	3.27
Citizens and citizen groups should play a role in guiding the character of future growth	.95	.433	4.35	4.44	4.44	4.26	4.37
Tourism is likely to remain the mainstay of the Aransas County economy	.27	.897	4.29	4.26	4.30	4.18	4.25
I live close enough to walk to local stores	.65	.631	2.59	2.48	2.33	2.55	2.56
I like the small town feel of downtown Rockport and Fulton	.95	.435	4.27	4.40	4.36	4.24	4.21
I prefer to shop at a large chain retailer rather than small local stores	.84	.502	2.55	2.38	2.54	2.55	2.36

Interesting shopping is important in a tourism-based economy	.93	.449	4.14	4.24	4.16	4.00	4.21
I enjoy purchasing fresh seafood from local boats and docks	.56	.696	4.26	4.17	4.18	4.18	4.36
I would be willing to give up some yard space in return for more walkable neighborhood and closer proximity to shops and retail	.91	.459	3.19	3.00	2.98	3.17	2.92
It is important to preserve the remaining areas of windswept oaks	1.79	.130	4.40	4.42	4.44	4.31	4.67
Natural areas, such as oak motts, floodplains, wetlands, and prairies are important to the economy of Aransas	1.96	.100	4.27	4.08	4.34	4.19	4.34
Note: <sup>ab</sup> Similar subscripts indicate significant differences using Tukey 's post-hoc comparisons. <sup>1</sup> Strongly Disagree=1, Strongly Agree=5							

## Discussion and Implications

The purpose of the study reported here was to determine residents' attitudes and concerns towards growth and quality of life in Aransas County, Texas. While most respondents are positive about the growth that has occurred, they are clearly concerned about the level of projected future growth in the county, and they feel its citizens should be engaged in the decision-making process, an even stronger feeling than they have about government officials' involvement in the planning process. Residents seem to have high expectations of using tourism as a vehicle for economic development, but at the same time the majority of Aransas County residents want to preserve the county's natural resources, coastal charm, and small-town atmosphere.

Specifically, the majority of residents in the study prefer neighborhoods that are walkable and want the county to keep its coastal "charm." The strong preference for "interesting shopping" is consistent with a tourist-based economy. The survey results also suggest that many residents as well as visitors might be attracted to more compact, pedestrian-scale neighborhoods. A large proportion of the respondents would like to preserve additional tracts of significant natural areas, and more important, they are willing to pay for that amenity through some form of minor taxation. The fact that most of respondents actively participate outdoor recreation activities also suggests the possibility of strong support for conservation efforts in the county.

The results of the study clearly indicate a strong preoccupation with growth issues in Aransas County. The results also illuminate areas where Extension education programs could help local citizens address these issues in an informed manner. Almost all residents, and visitors for that matter, recognized that tourism will be a key to the economic viability of the county for the foreseeable future. But the very attractions that draw tourists to Aransas County (quaint small-town coastal charm and natural coastal beauty) may be destroyed by

the growth they engender. Residents recognize that some form of growth management and natural area conservation will have to take place if long term economic viability is to be maintained.

Compact growth, variously referred to as "smart growth" or "new urbanism," is one pattern of development that could help Aransas County absorb additional residents without losing coastal charm or critical natural areas. Walkability is a hallmark of compact growth. The fact that many Aransas County residents expressed a willingness to give up some yard space for a more walkable neighborhood demonstrates a substantial predisposition for at least some elements of compact growth. Consequently, Aransas County residents could be readily engaged on issues of growth management, including smart growth and natural area conservation.

Study findings could thus enable Extension educators in Aransas County and other areas along the Texas coast to better help local citizens explore the tradeoffs involved in tourism development and natural area conservation. Through such programs, Texas' coastal citizens could more fully take quality of life issues into consideration so potential conflicts could be confronted and minimized for all local stakeholders.

The results of the study reflect a need for sustainable tourism planning for Aransas County and coastal counties in general. It is essential for Extension agents, community leaders, and local residents to create and implement projects compatible with sustainable development for the County and even the entire coastal region.

The survey revealed that an important segment of the local population, those living in the area longer than 15 years, had significantly different views of growth and conservation than people living in the county for shorter periods of time. Part-time and full-time residents also showed some differences in their attitudes toward growth. For example, full-time residents feel Aransas County has not adapted as well to the influx of new residents and do not feel they live close enough to local stores compared with part-time residents. These preliminary findings from full-time and part-time residents open the door for more in-depth research suggesting that different views of a community is based on time spent in residence.

The importance of a survey such as the one reported here is that it shows that resident differ on growth and natural resource preservation, and this may affect future tourism development projects. Extension educators and urban planners should try to understand who the locals are and how length of residence can affect residents' needs. A regional approach to tourism planning may end up being a more cost effective and inclusive approach for coastal counties (Ahn et al., 2002).

The information in this article can be used by county Extension agents to enhance their communications with local residents via program development and information dissemination. Residents are often not even aware of the agencies that are a link between community needs and planning efforts; this is clearly a key role Extension can play (Nieto, Schaffner, & Henderson, 1997).

Community design teams and planning charettes that focus on community visioning for tourism development and growth management scenarios could be used to involve local citizens. Extension educators can also use targeted programs to identify key residents representing various stakeholders, i.e., businesses, government, tourism planners, convention and visitor bureaus, non-profits, and many other entities that may want to become more involved in tourism planning. Educational programs on ecotourism development are another example of a specific approach that will enable citizens and community leaders to learn more about environmental protection and conservation.

Because Aransas County is a growing retirement area, this information is especially relevant for retired persons who already live there or for those who plan to move to the area. Networking with nearby counties with similar challenges is also suggested to determine how other communities have been confronted with

change and how it has been managed.

## Future Recommendations

The findings of the study reported here affirm the importance of identifying and understanding the attitudes of local residents towards economic, cultural, environmental, and quality of life issues that affect coastal communities. The study also uncovered a finding showing differences by residence status (part-time and years in residence) and community attitudes that requires more investigation. These results are suggestive of possible conflicts between amenity-oriented and economic-oriented residents. One implication evident from the study is that widespread support for growth policies may be achieved when it both benefits amenity-related and economic-related features of the community. However, other important information about county residents, e.g., racial and ethnic diversity, and homeownership, provides excellent baseline data that may help local officials and Extension agents gain support for tourism development or conservation programs in any county.

It should be noted that one limitation of the research is the convenience sampling method. These data are cross sectional, and study participants were not randomly selected residents from Aransas County. The large number of questionnaires collected, however, does reveal some very significant trends in the county and suggests, therefore, that properly designed and administered convenience-sampled surveys can still provide extremely useful information for Extension educators. The results of the particular survey reported here have already been instrumental in encouraging local county and city officials to engage the public on growth issues.

Future data collection should explore more in-depth techniques to show how residents feel about balancing growth, conservation, and sustainable development via focus groups or more structured interviews. Finally, more multidisciplinary research must be pursued on the long-term benefits of walkable communities by professionals in health and nutrition, recreation and tourism, and urban planning.

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