

BUILDING HOMES WHERE THE BUFFALO ROAMED

By Janet Raloff
April 28th, 2008
[Web edition](#)

• [A A](#) Text Size

Being environmentally conscious is no guarantee you'll put your home where you mouth is, a new study finds.

Animals tend to thrive best when given big blocks of land or stretches of water unencumbered by homes, roads, and sewage. So in terms of biodiversity, it's best to avoid sprawl. Yet in the Teton Valley, a portion of the greater Yellowstone ecosystem straddling the borders of Idaho and Wyoming, people have been building big homes in some of the more environmentally fragile areas — in woodlands, on mountainsides, and along streams.

Disproportionately, people who have been building homes in these more sensitive areas — ones facing the highest risks of losing species diversity — tend to be older, better educated, and more environmentally conscious home buyers than are those in the region's agricultural or urban communities. People who moved into wilder lands have also tended to live in small households, with just one or two dwellers. But that's not to suggest they're tree huggers roughing it in small cabins. Many homes being built in the region's more ecologically fragile areas rival or exceed the size of homes in town, notes conservation biologist M. Nils Peterson of Michigan State University. He led the new study, which identified the home-siting trends.

During the 1990s, the Teton Valley experienced a 74 percent growth in its population (to some 6,000) and 85 percent rise in the numbers of households (to around 2,100). The Michigan State scientists refer to Individuals who grew up in this region as natives, and those drawn here from elsewhere as immigrants.

Peterson's team interviewed residents of more than 400 households to find how they ended up in Teton Valley and what features determined where they settled within it.

Local-born residents tended to live in cities and farmlands and typically said they chose those areas to be near family or in close proximity to jobs.

Immigrants, by contrast, were more likely than local-born residents to say they were drawn by the Valley's natural resources. They're also more likely than the native residents to express ecocentric values. On questionnaires, they tended to place humans within ecosystems, not as lords over the natural world.

Among surveyed Valley residents with advanced college degrees, one-quarter had majored in environmental fields such as ecology, forestry, wildlife biology, botany, or zoology.

Overall, they and other surveyed immigrants to the region expressed an appreciation for the interconnectedness of creatures within an ecosystem. So as a group, the people who moved into fragile environments recognized that

residential development – such as their home – risked stressing the very natural resources they prized and which had made the vistas in and around their homesteads so attractive.

Did these individuals also recognize the apparent hypocrisy of building in sensitive environments? “Absolutely,” Peterson says. “In fact, most of them knew they were ‘part of the problem.’”

One recent Idaho Fish and Game retiree, a biologist, had to speak loudly during his interview with Peterson’s team “so his voice would carry over the nail guns that were tacking his new home together.” As the Michigan scientists relate in their new paper, due for publication soon in an upcoming issue of *Conservation Biology*, that retiree said he thought the biggest threat to the local environment was “the loss of winter range (for mule deer and elk).” He added that “I’ve now become part of [the problem] because my wife won’t live in town.”

Yet Peterson says that “when we talked about development,” such environmentally savvy residents acknowledged to the Michigan scientists that “they want to see development stop” or moves made toward development that’s more “conservation-oriented, where houses are clustered with lots of open space.”

“At first blush” such arguments “don’t seem to make sense,” Peterson says. Then, you think about it a bit more, he says, and the logic of these eco-friendly immigrants becomes understandable if not always defensible.

People trained in forestry appreciate trees. Fisheries biologists can lust over trout streams. Rangeland biologists long to build a home where the buffalo roamed — and where the deer and antelope still play.

But in this area, where there have been no zoning restrictions, willy-nilly development threatens to litter the region with tiny crazy-quilt patches of unimproved wilderness. Hardly a deer’s dream. And the area’s prized cutthroat trout? Over the past 18 years, residential development has led to their near extinction in the Teton River, Peterson’s team reports.

The disturbing bottom line, the researchers argue, is that understanding the fragility of ecosystems and appreciating their value isn’t enough to keep people from potentially despoiling it. Getting even enlightened souls to tread more lightly will appear to take considerably more work – and, potentially, regulations.

▲ [Print](#)

▲ | Found in: [Ecology](#), [Environment](#) and [Science & Society](#)

● [Comment](#)