

UNDERSTANDING SEASONAL HOME USE:

A RECOMMENDED RESEARCH AGENDA

Susan I. Stewart

Research Social Scientist, USDA Forest Service, North Central Forest Experiment Station, 5801 N. Pulaski, Chicago, IL 60646-6016

Daniel J. Stynes

Professor, Department of Park and Recreation Resources, 131 Natural Resources Bldg., Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824-1222

Seasonal homes are a part of many people's recreation and tourism experiences, yet few studies address the choice, characteristics, use, or impacts of seasonal homes. Methodological issues associated with seasonal homes research are discussed, and a study underway in Michigan is described to show how some of these issues can be dealt with.

Introduction

Seasonal homes are a familiar feature of the urban-wildland interface, springing up wherever there are rural, amenity rich areas within a day's drive of a population center. Between 1960 and 1980, all but 9 states recorded a net gain in the number of seasonal housing units (Spotts 1992). But in spite of their importance, visibility, and familiarity, little is known about how seasonal homes are used or the impacts of this use on the local area. Seasonal home use has some characteristics of tourism, in that it involves overnight travel away from home. Seasonal home visitors also make use of local recreation resources, and tend to be familiar enough with the local community that their use patterns and information needs are more like those of local residents than those of other tourists.

Perhaps because seasonal home use has characteristics of both recreation and tourism, neither field has done much research on seasonal homes. Information about seasonal home ownership is very limited, and comes mostly from occasional questions included in studies of other recreation or planning issues. This paper outlines the reasons seasonal home research is needed, the unique characteristics of seasonal homes that make such research difficult, and the methods that might be useful in overcoming these problems. The paper concludes with an example of how research design issues were resolved in a study of seasonal home users currently underway in Michigan.

Seasonal home use has strong links to outdoor recreation activity. Seasonal homes provide overnight lodging for single purpose trips (e.g., to a ski area) while also serving as a base for a variety of resource-based recreation activities. A 1978 study showed that a quarter of all Michigan skiers relied on family-owned seasonal homes for overnight housing during their ski trip (Stynes and Mahoney 1980). The 1980 Michigan Boating Survey found that 30% of registered boat owners also own a seasonal home, and a quarter of all registered boats are kept at seasonal homes (Stynes and Safronoff 1982). The boating study included enough seasonal home owners to identify some patterns of ownership. Young families had the lowest rates of seasonal home ownership, and rates were highest among older families and empty nesters.

Based on the findings from the boating and skiing studies, we speculate that seasonal homes may account for up to a quarter of the outdoor recreational activity in Michigan. Seasonal home ownership also plays an important role in shaping the travel and tourism behavior of seasonal home owners, including travel to and from seasonal homes as well as day trips emanating from a

seasonal residence. The financial commitment associated with owning a seasonal home represents one of the biggest recreation/tourism budgeting decisions a household will make. Many subsequent leisure choices may be affected as the seasonal home becomes the primary vacation destination, and spending to furnish and maintain the home precludes other travel or recreation-related purchases.

A Suggested Research Agenda

As with any research topic, seasonal homes research should progress from exploratory to descriptive to explanatory. Seasonal homes research from the late '60's and early '70's provided some exploratory and descriptive information, including patterns of ownership and use for selected areas (Coppock 1977; Marans and Wellman 1976; Ragatz 1969). As this exploratory research is updated, we need to use qualitative approaches to enrich our understanding of behaviors, lifestyles, and meanings associated with seasonal homes.

Future descriptive research should update and expand upon early seasonal homes studies. Generating descriptions of seasonal homes trends and spatial patterns from Census data and other secondary sources would be a good place to start. Land use planners are interested in tenure, land and housing characteristics of seasonal homes, while real estate agents want to better understand the seasonal home choice process. Many business, community service, and recreation and tourism groups are interested in use patterns and needs and wants of seasonal home owners. Further descriptive research on these and other topics in different geographical areas will provide a firmer basis for explanatory and predictive studies.

Explanatory research can help us to understand the spatial, temporal, and activity patterns associated with seasonal homes in order to anticipate future patterns (e.g., Bell 1976; Burby et al. 1972; Tombaugh 1968). Explanatory studies are also crucial in assessing the short and long range social, economic, and environmental impacts of seasonal homes (Gamble et al. 1975; Gartner 1986). Establishing linkages between seasonal homes research and other areas of research, such as retirement migration, recreation, leisure time, travel, land use, and community development is a critical part of seasonal homes research. Existing fields of study such as these will continue to be a major source of theoretical concepts and models, at least until seasonal homes research makes significant progress.

Seasonal homes research topics are many and varied. Four general research themes deserve some attention: 1. seasonal home choice processes; 2. characteristics of seasonal homes/properties; 3. characteristics and behavior patterns of seasonal home owners and users, and 4. impacts of seasonal home properties.

Understanding Seasonal Home Choice

Buying a seasonal home involves a complex, extended decision process which does not resemble the simpler consumer or recreation choices upon which most choice research to date has focused (Stewart 1994). The seasonal home decision provides an opportunity to conduct basic research on long term, complex choice processes. Understanding how people learn about, evaluate, and choose among options can provide new insights into other complex decisions consumers make, and may also shed new light on simple choice processes. Because the seasonal home is not a necessity, the buyer is seldom under time pressure to complete the decision process. This condition, together with the spatial dispersion of the alternatives being considered and the lack of a centralized information source, makes the pace of seasonal home decision making quite slow compared to other decision processes. While decision research rarely includes a temporal component, there is reason to believe that the passage of time does affect decision making (Stewart and Stynes in press). Observing a decision process which occurs slowly allows identification of the sequence of events and potential interdependence between time, the decision making environment, and the decision maker.

The seasonal home choice process also highlights the factors that draw buyers to an area. Understanding the buyer's decision process can help real estate agents anticipate problems the buyer may experience at different stages of the decision process, so that s/he can provide the right kind of assistance throughout the buying process.

Seasonal Home Characteristics

Although Census of Housing data provides an estimate of how many seasonal homes there are in a given area, there is seldom any other information available on the characteristics of seasonal properties. Research needs to provide more descriptive information, including structural characteristics (single or multiple unit, winterization), spatial distribution, physical setting (lake, forest), subdivision or association affiliation, ownership type (condominium, timeshare) and so on. The environmental impacts of seasonal properties were a particular concern in the 1970's (e.g., American Society of Planning Officials 1976; Gamble et al. 1975), and can be best understood if the physical characteristics of seasonal properties are known. In the wildland-urban interface where wildfire may be a threat, it is important to assess the structural characteristics, building materials, and lot characteristics (e.g., distance to trees, driveway configuration) to determine what steps could be taken to make a property more defensible in the event of wildfire (Fried 1993). General land use planning, often a contentious process in amenity-rich areas facing development pressures, is also facilitated by information about seasonal home properties.

Understanding Seasonal Home Owners and Users

Seasonal home owners and users represent two population groups with many potential differences. Describing the demographic characteristics of these groups is a necessary precursor to any other seasonal homes research. The motivations for seasonal home ownership or use, the patterns of use, recreation activity patterns, and market area for seasonal home developments should also be addressed.

The attitudes, values, and beliefs of seasonal home owners are often different from those of permanent residents (Marans and Wellman 1978). When a community is seeking the input of its residents, it is important that seasonal residents are systematically included. Seasonal residents' preferences for community services, health care, education, and infrastructure should be considered, and should not be assumed to mirror those of permanent residents (Girard and Gartner 1993).

Public land managers will have contact with seasonal residents in many areas because public lands provide viewsheds, open spaces, and recreational resources that seasonal residents value. Seasonal residents generally have less experience with rural land management practices, do not hold jobs in the local area, and are very concerned about maintaining the recreational and amenity resources, which taken together can make them unsympathetic to extractive uses of natural resources. Their viewpoints may be backed by enough education and experience with policy issues to make them a formidable interest group, whichever side of the land management debate they favor.

Measuring The Impact Of Seasonal Properties

The impacts of general tourism have been of great interest to tourism researchers and local communities, especially regarding how much tourism is "worth" to an area in economic terms. Seasonal visitors bring money into the region, and may spend considerably more, perhaps in less "leaky" sectors, than do short-stay visitors. Groceries, recreational equipment - often including major items such as boats or skis - home furnishings, and home maintenance services are a few of the categories where seasonal residents are quite likely to outspend other tourists. Many of these purchases are made in the local area because the items are specifically designed for the resort area (e.g., "cottage" style furnishings). Others are difficult to transport, making it impractical to bring them from home (e.g., appliances or fresh food). Including seasonal home owners and users in economic impact studies, preferably as a separate segment of visitors,

would allow us to refine our understanding of tourism impacts, and to know what kind of impacts a community can expect when much of its tourism activity is generated by seasonal homes (Waters, 1990).

Recreation planners need to know how many people visit the seasonal homes in their area, for how long, and in which seasons of the year. Seasonal home owners and their guests often make use of local recreational facilities and should be included in local recreation needs analyses. The availability of major recreation facilities (e.g., downhill ski areas, golf courses) and amenity natural resources (e.g., forests, streams, and lakes) are important factors in attracting seasonal home buyers to a location (Stewart 1994). Performing a recreation needs analysis that does not include seasonal residents not only undercounts potential users, but also fails to recognize the needs and preferences of a group of tax paying citizens.

Traditional population forecasting methods that rely on permanent resident counts have proven very inaccurate in predicting amenity-related migration. Seasonal home owners often convert their seasonal residence to a permanent retirement home. Research is needed to identify the property types, seasonal home owners or user characteristics, and communities where conversion is most likely. By estimating conversion rates for seasonal home communities and/or housing types and including them in population and economic forecasts, we can better predict future retirement migration in an area.

Social impacts associated with seasonal properties range from seasonal upswings in infrastructure and public service demands to potential for future retirement migration to clashing values and beliefs. Unlike tourists who visit for a short time and then leave, seasonal residents participate in community life more fully. They patronize local businesses, use public resources and facilities, and involve themselves in local policy issues. Seasonal home owners pay local property taxes in amounts that can be significant, in that they often own a rural area's most valuable residential property.

Methodological Issues

There are two ways we can learn more about seasonal homes and their use; (1) through studies targeted specifically at seasonal homes, owners, or users; and (2) by clearly identifying seasonal home owners or users as subpopulations in general recreation and travel studies. The former are critical to obtaining a comprehensive profile of seasonal homes, their owners, and users. The latter help place seasonal home activity within the broader context of recreation and tourism.

Seasonal homes research is complicated by several factors. The basic design issues are discussed under two broad categories:

- 1) population and sampling issues, and
- 2) measurement problems.

Population and Sampling Issues

In any survey it is important to begin with a clear definition of the study population. There are four populations relevant to seasonal homes research; seasonal homes, seasonal home owners, seasonal home users, and trips to seasonal homes. Studies that measure characteristics of all four populations within a single instrument must keep careful track of units of analysis and apply appropriate weights and adjustments to account for differences between the sampling unit and the unit of analysis. For example, if one samples homes and asks about the last trip to the home, trips by frequent users will be underrepresented. Conversely, a traffic intercept study would overrepresent owners who make frequent trips. The potential biases and appropriate weighting procedures are similar to those discussed by Perdue (1986) for travel surveys. Most seasonal home surveys will sample from populations of homes or properties in seasonal home areas. Complete sampling frames rarely exist, as most property listings do not clearly distinguish seasonal from permanent residences. What was a seasonal home one year may be a permanent residence the next, or vice versa. Whether a cabin, trailer, camping vehicle, or boat is classified as a seasonal home will depend on the study purpose.

Home owners are rarely in one to one correspondence with seasonal home properties, so some care must be taken when sampling properties to study home owners. For many variables of interest, different responses will be given by male and female heads of a household. The variety of joint ownership arrangements associated with seasonal homes (e.g., partners in ownership, extended family ownership, time-sharing) can further confound surveys. Should all owners be surveyed, just the principle owner, or a randomly chosen owner? There is no one way to deal with these issues, but the researcher must be aware of them and plan a way to handle them.

Studying seasonal home users poses even more difficult problems. Users may include the owner, family, and friends, as well as renters. The owner may handle rentals or may turn the job over to a property management firm. Users will include both day and overnight visitors. The owner may not be able to speak for all users, and may not even be aware of some. Use will vary over the course of the week, weekend and year with recreational activities, season, and school vacation schedules. Sampling should be done carefully to insure adequate representation of different time periods.

Measurement Issues

The wider the variation in seasonal home characteristics, the more difficult it becomes to design structured questionnaires that apply well to all the possible situations. Personal or telephone interviews have the clear advantage over mailed instruments in allowing for flexible questions and response categories, but both approaches introduce sampling problems in that seasonal homes are occupied on an infrequent basis and may not have telephones. A seasonal home use scenario illustrates several measurement problems:

Chris and Pat Doe own a cabin in northern Michigan. Chris comes up to the cabin with two children and stays the whole month of June. Pat commutes every day for the first week, doesn't come the second week, and spends the last 2 weeks at the cabin on vacation. On one day of their stay, Chris and Pat drive 60 miles to a nearby National Park, sightsee in the area, then return to their cabin that night. During this time their eldest daughter and her family stay at the cabin for 4 nights, and two other couples visit on weekends. The Does leave the key for a neighbor who may use the cabin in the next two weeks.

Complex patterns of use like these pose problems in how to measure "use". Should one measure nights or days the cabin is occupied, or trips to the cabin? How should one handle commuting and distinct parties arriving in separate vehicles? What is "party size" in this situation? Measuring recreation activity is even more difficult as different people may engage in different activities in each day of their stay.

The Doe's trip to the National Park illustrates problems with handling trips originating at the seasonal home in recreation and travel surveys. Would a survey of park visitors ask for the Doe's permanent address and assume the trip began there? Origins and destinations become less well defined when the seasonal home is used as a temporary "permanent" residence. Determining trip origins is especially troublesome for people who split their time between two permanent residences (e.g., in Michigan and Florida). Problems like these must be handled properly to insure the data's reliability and validity.

A Study of Seasonal Homes

A study of seasonal homes and home owners currently underway in northern Michigan illustrates some of the research questions that can arise in seasonal homes research, and our decisions on how to address them in this situation.

This study has three primary objectives: 1) to describe characteristics of seasonal homes (location, acreage, value, tenure, and setting), and seasonal home owners (household size

and makeup, income, age, motivations for ownership, retirement status, recreation interests); 2) to measure patterns of seasonal home use, and recreation activity associated with seasonal homes; and 3) to estimate local area economic impacts associated with seasonal homes.

Design

The study objectives suggest somewhat distinct survey approaches. Based on the first objective alone, the study called for a general cross sectional survey of seasonal homes or seasonal home owners where we would send out surveys to a representative sample for a single point in time. As we began designing possible questions, it became clear that this approach posed problems for obtaining reliable information on use, recreation activity, and spending. While owners could probably estimate annual property tax, insurance, and major maintenance and repair costs for the past year, it was unlikely that they could recall detailed patterns of use and trip spending over an entire year. We could simplify the task by getting "last trip" information, but then the timing of the surveys becomes critical. No single time could capture complex seasonal use and activity patterns. Meeting objectives 2 and 3 required sampling throughout the year. Options included using a panel study in which the same home owners would be recontacted throughout the year, or drawing independent samples to be surveyed, in our case a subsample for each month of the year.

The use of a panel survey was ruled out. Not only would patterns of seasonal home use tend to aggravate the usual problems of panel attrition, but contact would need to be made by telephone, which many seasonal homes, especially the more modest ones, do not have. There were problems with surveying a new group of seasonal home owners each month as well. If general population characteristics were measured in different months, would the answers vary by season? Assessing economic impacts required measures of both annual and trip-related expenses in the local area. If independent samples were surveyed each month should we fix the year for annual expenses at calendar 1993 yielding distinct recall periods for different samples, or should we request annual spending within the past 12 months, so that each group was reporting spending for a different set of 12 months? We concluded that annual spending on property taxes, insurance, and so on were best gathered near tax time, suggesting a mailing to the full sample in the spring.

This left us with the problem of how to collect reliable data on seasonal home use, including recreation activity and spending while at the seasonal home. We were not sure that owners could make reliable estimates of these variables for an entire year's activities. Serious recall problems seemed likely, compounded by extremely variable use patterns across individuals and seasons of the year. Measuring use with any reasonable degree of accuracy and precision called for a different approach. We decided to adopt the "last trip" approach from travel surveys. We would ask for detailed information about party size, spending, and recreation activities only for the most recent trip. This would reduce recall error and simplify the questionnaire.

After weighing the two approaches (e.g., one survey sent in the spring versus surveys sent each month), we decided to compromise and do both in a two-phase survey. A general survey was sent to the full sample of 1300 seasonal homes in late May. The *general* survey covers descriptive information (objective 1) and annual expenses associated with the seasonal home. This will be followed by a 2-page *trip* survey that measures length of stay, recreation activity, party size, and trip spending for the most recent trip to the seasonal home. The trip survey also measures the number of nights the home has been occupied during the previous month. The first trip survey was mailed with the general survey to save on mailing costs. In subsequent months, we will sample only from subjects who have returned the general survey and agreed to fill out another 1 page (trip) survey. This allows us to eliminate properties that do not qualify as seasonal homes, and should significantly increase response rates for the phase 2 surveys.

Sampling

Our sample of seasonal homes was drawn from names of property owners on county property tax roles. Six counties were chosen to provide good representation of Great Lakes and inland areas on both the east and west sides of Michigan's northern lower peninsula. Three townships within each county were chosen, and names and addresses selected randomly from the property tax listings. Properties were considered "seasonal" if the permanent mailing address was non-local. Vacant properties were eliminated by excluding all properties valued at less than \$10,000. Rental, commercial, and other non-seasonal home properties will be screened out by the first questionnaire. This sampling approach misses some low value seasonal homes, and any seasonal home owners whose tax bills are mailed to the seasonal home. Mailing to all property owners, however, would at least double the cost of the study. Going door-to-door was also considered, but judged to be too expensive and not effective enough, since few people are at seasonal homes in early spring.

Measurement

Some of the complexities of the design and reasons for particular questions can be illustrated for objective 2. For each county or area, we would like to estimate the number of people staying in seasonal homes by season or month. To estimate this number, we need to multiply the number of seasonal homes in the area by the average number of days per month it is occupied, by the average number of people in the home each day. Seasonal home counts are available from the Census. Monthly occupancies will be obtained in the trip survey. Respondents will be asked to circle the days of the month the home will be occupied on a calendar for that month. We will compute the average days occupied, test for variations by region and other characteristics, and estimate some simple models to explain variations and predict occupancy rates by month. Party size will be estimated for the most recent trip to the seasonal home. Information about guests and other visitors staying at the seasonal home during the recent stay will be included in estimating a daily party size. Recreation activity participation data for the recent stay will be gathered so that person days of boating, fishing, hunting and so on can be estimated in a form comparable to recreation use estimates for permanent residents. In a related study we will estimate recreation activity for visitors staying overnight in campgrounds and motels and for day users from outside the county in order to round out the complete picture of recreation use at the destination.

Conclusions

Seasonal homes are an important element of recreation and tourism. The existing research on seasonal homes needs to be updated and extended, working from exploratory to descriptive to explanatory studies.

A number of somewhat unique definitional, sampling, measurement, and overall research design problems arise in studying seasonal homes. These problems require attention to increasing the efficiency of seasonal home studies, while also capturing quite extensive variations within the population: variations in seasonal home types, in the characteristics and motivations of owners, in the recreational activity patterns of seasonal home users, and in the spatial and temporal use patterns of owners and others. As with recreation and tourism research more generally, seasonal home research will benefit from a variety of research approaches, including qualitative and quantitative, cross sectional and longitudinal, and use of both primary and secondary data sources. The temporal dimensions of seasonal home choice and use indicate a need to employ longitudinal designs, including time diaries, panel studies, and creative analyses of secondary data.

Other sources of information about seasonal home users include general recreation and travel studies. Recreation activity at and trips to seasonal homes are frequently measured in these studies, although the extent and accuracy of coverage is often unclear. If seasonal home owners are not explicitly included as a population subgroup in a recreation or travel study, much seasonal home related activity will be missed or measured inaccurately. It is

better to exclude seasonal home use entirely than to be unsure about which or how much seasonal home activity has been included in a general recreation or travel study. In particular, general survey measures of the temporal patterns of both vacation trips and recreation activity could be substantially affected by the inclusion of a subgroup of seasonal home owners. If seasonal home use is to be covered by a recreation or travel study, the definition of the study population, sampling, and measurement instrument (i.e., the design and wording of questions) must be given careful attention. Questions should be evaluated to make sure they apply to the seasonal home subpopulation, and analyses should take into account the distinct patterns of this subgroup. As we gain a better understanding of the characteristics and behavior patterns of this population subgroup, our ability to accommodate them properly within other studies will improve.

Finally, recreation and travel surveys that do not intend to measure seasonal home related activity must be aware of possible contamination in their results if such activity is not explicitly excluded in their sampling frame or through filter questions. Recreation and travel researchers should assume that any activity potentially related to seasonal home use (e.g., local recreation during the tourism seasons, travel to and from popular recreation or tourism areas) may involve a population subgroup of seasonal home owners. Researchers need to make a conscious decision to include or exclude seasonal home owners. If the choice is to include the seasonal home subpopulation, we recommend treating it as a separate population stratum and carrying out some subgroup analyses. This approach will assure that the seasonal home component has been properly covered, while also contributing to our understanding of this important component of recreation and travel activity.

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