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Understanding poverty and unemployment on the Olympic Peninsula after the Spotted Owl[☆]

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Abstract

Conserving the natural ecology of an area through environmental restrictions has become increasingly common. The harvest limitations on national forests in the habitat of the Northern Spotted Owl in the 1990s are a well-known example. The controversy that ensued with this listing quickly became framed as one of jobs versus the environment, a contention that often characterizes conservation efforts. This contention is closely tied to export-based economic theory which assumes that a rural area's natural resource commodity base is the most important factor in economic development and community well-being. However, other factors could impact well-being including a prior period of industrial restructuring, the presence of minorities, and mitigating factors such as increasing educational attainment, retirement migration and commuting patterns. Focusing on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State, I use panel regression to examine the power of indicators of these different factors to explain poverty and unemployment rates on the peninsula in 2000. Industrial restructuring and the presence of minorities are the only significant explanatory variables for poverty. The presence of minorities is the only significant variable for unemployment rates.

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1. Introduction

“If it were a more ordinary country, less lovely and less hard, maybe the love and the outrage would not be so keen. But there is a quality about the forested mountains of the Olympic Peninsula. . .that gets a grip on the mind and heart.” (Dietrich, 1992, p. 15)

In 1990, the Northern Spotted Owl was listed as an endangered species, severely limiting timber harvests from national forests in western Washington, western Oregon and northern California. Many claimed that this would have a devastating impact on the well-being of the region’s timber-dependent communities. Such claims of severe economic harm resulting from efforts to preserve or enhance the natural ecology of an area were not unique to this controversy. These predictions are closely tied to export-based economic theories. However, natural resource-based communities in the United States are often poor, and environmental restrictions were not the only factor to influence the forested areas of the West in the latter part of the 20th century. The timber industry itself went through a period of intense industrial restructuring in the 1980s.

This prior history and its impact on communities were generally ignored in debates about the effects of harvest restrictions for environmental reasons. In this research I use indicators for each of these events to investigate whether export-based theory or industrial restructuring accounts for variation in community well-being, poverty and unemployment rates in 2000. I focus on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State, an area influenced by both events. Like other parts of the spotted owl region, the harvesting and milling of timber (much of it from national forests) was important part of many local economies and a part of community identities (Dietrich, 1992).

In addition to these events specific to the timber economy, other factors could also influence community well-being. Particularly important is the presence of minority populations. American Indian¹ reservations and tribal areas are located throughout the Olympic Peninsula and the Latino population grew rapidly during the 1990s. Finally, Olympic Peninsula areas were influenced differently by broad social changes (commuting, educational attainment and retirement migration) as they were drawn more closely into the influence of rapidly growing nearby metropolitan areas. These changes could dampen the overall influence of the spotted owl decision and industrial restructuring.

Using panel regression, I examine the power of indicators of these different factors to explain area poverty and unemployment rates in 2000. Because western counties are large and economically diverse, this research uses sub-county areas formed from census tracts for this analysis.

Much has been written about the spotted owl decision, but only a few studies have looked at this issue at the sub-county level or tested the explanatory power of different theoretical perspectives. The original owl decision is now history. However, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently proposed removing the “critical habitat” designation from 1.5 million acres in the spotted owl region as a whole (U.S. Department of Interior, 2007, p. 32745). This has already become a contested issue, with over 100 scientists alleging political interference and distorted science (Oregonian, 2007, p. F1).

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