

Tourism and Rural Gentrification in Eastern Kentucky

Amelia Loeffler, Department of Geography



THE UNIVERSITY
of NORTH CAROLINA
at CHAPEL HILL

Background

- The Red River Gorge Geological Area is a 29,000-acre National Natural Landmark in Central Appalachia located within the Daniel Boone National Forest and adjacent to Natural Bridge State Park.
- Nearly half a million people visit The Red each year to climb, hike, camp, and enjoy the landscape of the Appalachian foothills. In recent years, this tourism traffic has increased, with up to 1 million tourists visiting the region annually.¹
- Rural gentrification is the process through which rural landscapes, especially those characterized by natural amenities or recreational opportunities, are re-commodified for capital investment and accumulation, leading to in-migration of new demographics and displacement of longtime residents.

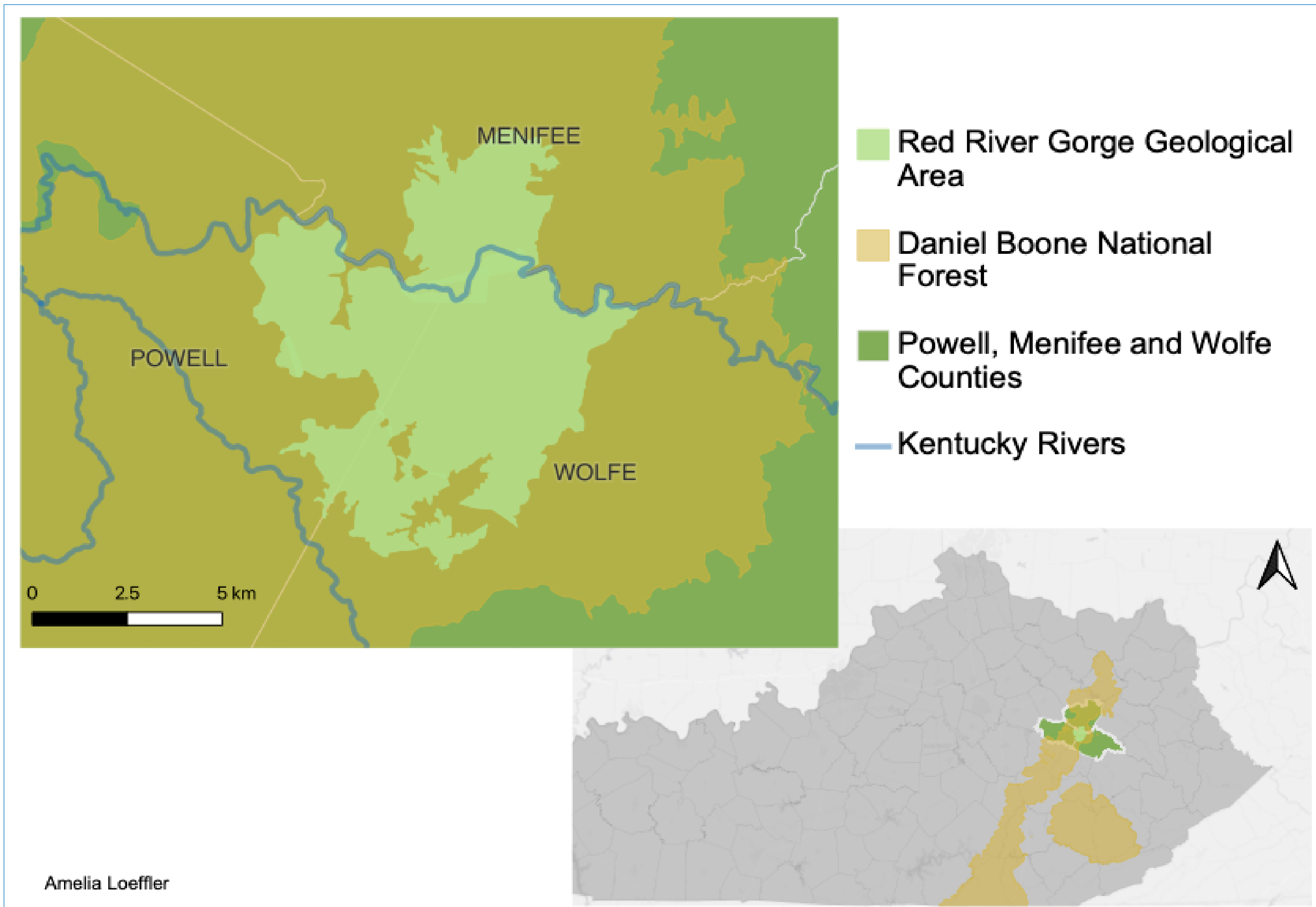


Figure 1: Location of Red River Gorge Geological Area, Daniel Boone National Forest, and the immediate surrounding counties.

References

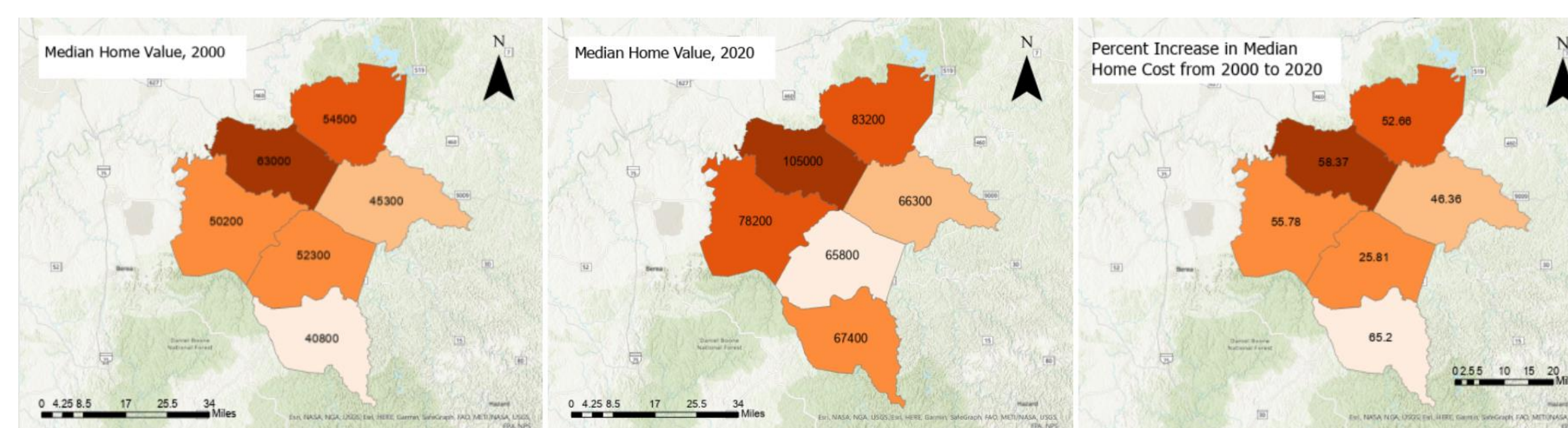
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Research Questions and Methods

- How does increasing tourism impact the counties and communities surrounding the RRG?
- To answer my research question, I used both semi-structured interviews and existing data.
- I conducted 10 qualitative interviews with a convenience/snowball sample of key stakeholders including employees of Powell County Tourism, homeowners, business owners and park workers. I recorded these interviews and analyzed thematically, focusing on themes identified in my literature review.
- To better understand broader context of economic factors and to create visual representation of data, I utilized open-source data such as Census data, American Community Survey Data, data from the National Landcover Database, and the Kentucky Tourism 2017 and 2020 Impact Reports.

Data and Findings

- Analysis of census data and the Kentucky Tourism Economic Impact Study showed several themes in the study area: increased travel spending, decreased employment, an increasing rate of in-migration, and increasing home values.



Population In-Migration by County (2016-2020)

County	From a different county in KY	From a different state	Total
Estill	726	52	778
Lee	527	35	526
Powell	987	68	1,055
Menifee	384	3	387
Owsley	146	7	153
Wolfe	357	152	508

Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey

Population In-Migration by County (2005-2009)

County	From a different county in KY	From a different state	Total
Estill	226	78	344
Lee	352	157	509
Powell	551	266	817
Menifee	189	289	478
Owsley	170	108	278
Wolfe	133	0	133

Source: 2005-2009 American Community Survey County-to-County Migration Flows

Total Travel Spending (Millions)

County	2017	2021	Percent Change
Estill	9.25	9.4	1.622
Lee	5.75	6.0	4.38
Powell	17.18	19.1	11.18
Menifee	7.15	7.3	2.1
Owsley	1.19	1.2	.84
Wolfe	6.47	7.9	2.877

Source: Kentucky Tourism 2017 and 2020 Economic Impact County Stats

Employment

County	2017	2021	Percent Change
Estill	79	73	-7.6
Lee	59	56	-5.08
Powell	169	166	-1.775
Menifee	60	53	-11.67
Owsley	8	7	-12.5
Wolfe	52	52	0

Note: Employment includes "Jobs directly and indirectly supported by visitor activity (includes part-time and seasonal work). One job is defined as one person working at least one hour per week for fifty weeks during the calendar year."

Source: Kentucky Tourism 2017 and 2020 Economic Impact County Stats

Conclusions and Future Research

- Interviews with stakeholders revealed two central themes: the emergence of amenity migration ("the purchasing of primary or second residences in rural areas valued for their aesthetic, recreational, and other consumption-oriented use values"²) as a central theme in describing the role outdoor tourism plays in rural gentrification and the emergence of the rent gap theory (defined by Smith³ as the way gentrification occurs not in a "deterministic fashion where housing costs are lowest," but in areas where there is the largest difference between actual and potential land values) in relation to the study area.
- Land use maps show little change over time, suggesting that while development of land has not necessarily increased, "under-utilized" land has been re-imagined for tourism-oriented purposes.
- Future research should account for the proposed luxury resort development East of Stanton.

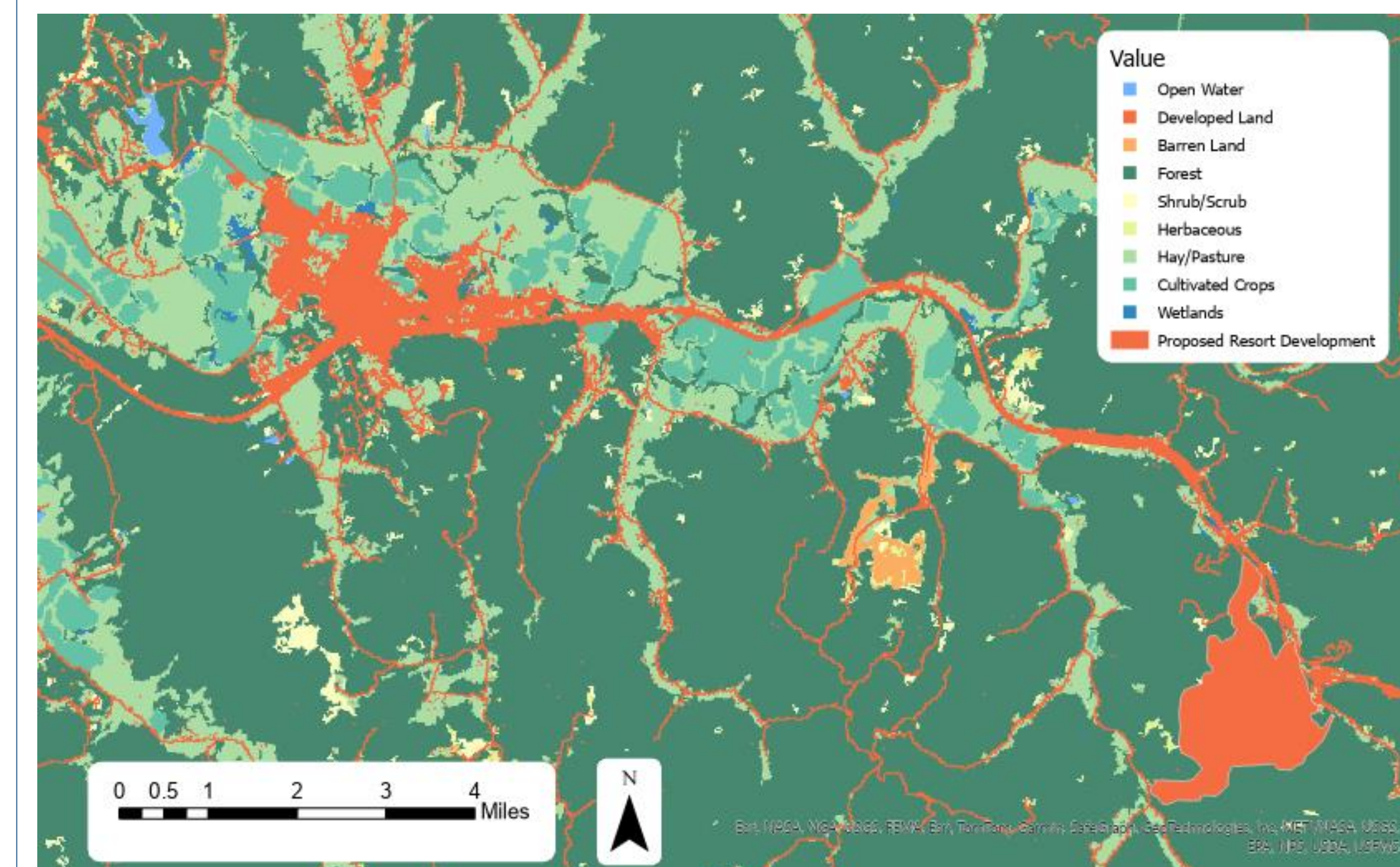


Figure 2 (Above): Reclassified landcover of Stanton, KY, including the site of a proposed luxury resort development.

Figure 3 (Left): Percent change in median home value over time in the study area.