

UIUC Extension Educator Perspectives on Southern Illinois

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As part of the Southern Illinois Community Assessment Project, phone and email interviews were conducted with University of Illinois Extension educators in February through March 2007 in 10 Southern Illinois multi-county and county units: Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union; Edwards and Wabash; Franklin; Gallatin, Hardin, Pope, and Saline; Hamilton, Wayne, and White; Williamson; Jackson; Jefferson; Perry; and Randolph. The objectives of the interviews were:

- To assess geographic identity of local residents and distinguishing characteristics of the region
- To assess threats and opportunities for the Southern Illinois region from the perspective of community leaders
- To assess the role of and awareness about the DSAC

University of Illinois Extension

The University of Illinois Extension is an outreach from the Urbana-Champaign campus to each of Illinois' 102 counties. The purpose of the Extension is to enhance health, quality of life, and safety for individuals and their communities. The Extension provides support in five areas:

- Healthy society
- Food security and safety
- Environmental stewardship
- Sustainable and profitable food production and marketing systems
- Enhancing youth, family and community well-being

Extension programs use many different formats to share valuable applications of University research, such as hands-on workshops, field days, or self-paced tutorials via the World Wide Web. There are 77 Extension units located throughout Illinois. U of I Extension is based in the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Methodology

A list of personnel for all twenty counties was obtained from the University of Illinois Extension website.¹ An email was sent to all Extension educators requesting a confidential phone interview about Southern Illinois, with the option of answering questions by email if preferred. The interview was composed of open-ended questions followed by qualitative analysis. A total of 54 personnel were contacted through email. Sixteen people completed phone or email surveys yielding an overall response rate of 29.6%. Geographically, units with higher response rates were Gallatin, Hardin, Pope, and Saline counties while the lowest response rates were from Hamilton, Wayne, White, and Perry counties. The positions of the sixteen Extension educators who participated in the study are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Response rate according to Extension position

<i>Position</i>	<i>Number of Respondents</i>
4-H leaders	4
Youth development educators	4
County directors	3
Nutrition educator	2
Community worker	2
Horticulture	1
Total	16

Key Findings

The key findings from the Extension officer interviews are summarized below with selected representative quotes.

- Extension personnel identified three major northern boundaries to define the geographic area of Southern Illinois: South of I-70, South of Mt Vernon, and South of Route 13. There was no significant correlation between place of residence and identification of northern boundary, which contradicted the hypothesis that residence farther south would give a northern boundary that was farther south.
- The beauty and nature of the outdoors was a prominent characteristic identified by respondents that distinguishes Southern Illinois from the rest of the state along with quality of life. However, economic depression was also expressed as a prominent factor unique to Southern Illinois.

“The place is just beautiful with the natural resources.”

“We have a lot of natural beauty as far as the lakes and the wildlife.”

¹ <http://web.extension.uiuc.edu/state/>

“The further south you go you get rolling hills. It’s more economically depressed than up in Chicago. We have beautiful scenery. People are outgoing and friendly. There’s not a lot of traffic. We have better weather. Most of the areas are good places to raise kids because we don’t have the crime that bigger cities have.”

- The Extension educators surveyed believed that Southern Illinois residents identify most with their community rather than their county or region, though they were seen as having attachments at all three scales.
- Unemployment was seen as the major threat to Southern Illinois Especially related to the perception that region is losing industry and manufacturing jobs to surrounding states. The population is getting older; young people leave the region and do not return because of few employment opportunities. However, the current work force was perceived as strong, and willing and determined to work, which is a possible asset to improve the depressed condition of the region.

“There’s not many jobs, so a lot of the time young people have to go elsewhere to find work.”

“A lot of people in our county travel to other counties and even to other states in order to get work.”

“Unemployment and no future for any type of new job market or industry.”

“There are plenty of people here who would be a great pool of labor to draw on – hard working people, ready to work.”

- Tourism, such as fishing, hunting, hiking, and historical tours were perceived by many respondents as the most important opportunities for Southern Illinois.

“We have a lot of recreation opportunities that have not been developed yet.”

“Tourism. We could keep expanding with that and do a lot more with all the natural beauty, lakes, forests, the Shawnee forest and so forth.”

- Many Extension personnel stated that the DSAC, having agricultural research and knowledge specific to the geography of Southern Illinois, is important to farmers as an educational resource. However, a number of respondents were either personally unfamiliar with the mission of DSAC or felt residents in general were unfamiliar. To best serve the needs of the region, DSAC must first promote and publicize its available resources.

“I think you should publicize more what resources are available. People can’t use resources they don’t know about! I think you could work closer with schools, Extension offices, churches, and senior centers.”