

**RES-224-25-0062, Dr M Huby, University of York**  
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**Developing Spatial Data for the Classification of Rural Areas**

Sustainable development demands that the economic and social needs of rural communities be considered in relation to needs for environmental protection. This study, conducted by both social and environmental scientists, brings together environmental data and information about lifestyles and living standards in different areas. It recognises social as well as environmental diversity as important in defining the kinds of policies needed for rural development and the information it provides can be used as a basis for selecting specific kinds of rural area for further research.

The main product of this study is the dataset on social and environmental conditions in rural areas (SECRA), intended to encourage and enable researchers and policy makers to include both social and environmental perspectives in their consideration of rural problems. It provides information about the 6,027 Super Output Areas (SOAs) in rural England. These areas were specifically designed for the collection and publication of the 2001 Population Census statistics. They are smaller than administrative wards but big enough to allow the release of data that, for reasons of confidentiality, are unavailable at smaller area levels. SOAs are roughly consistent in population size and each contains, on average, 400 households and 1500 residents. Rural SOAs are classified by the nature and sparsity of their settlements - towns, villages, hamlets and dispersed dwellings.

The dataset combines two approaches for choosing information to be included. One way was to think about the nature of the rural environment in England and to consider ways in which it faces threats to its biodiversity and productivity as a result of social, economic and political change. The other was to consider the ways in which the English countryside is used or valued by human populations and how their livelihoods, welfare, leisure activities and spiritual wellbeing are dependent on the prevailing environmental conditions. These approaches were combined in a conceptual framework that views all rural issues as having contemporaneous implications for the environment, society and economic vitality. The framework recognises the interdependencies between what is physically there, what it is like (the qualities of the place and its residents), the living and working conditions it offers, and the prevailing political and economic context.

These elements are all discussed in the SECRA report, which explains the definition of 'rural areas' and the use of SOAs as the base spatial units for the data. The report provides a brief literature based rationale for the relevance of sets of selected variables to rural conditions. Under natural and constructed features we include the size and topography of areas, types of vegetation cover and the presence of settlements, roads, industrial sites, facilities and cultural amenities. Characteristics of the areas and the people who live there are discussed and indicators of demography, human health, ecosystem health and environmental quality are included. The report then moves on to discuss indicators of the living and working conditions in different areas – housing, access to services, income and employment, education, tourism and leisure. In each section of the report a list of variables finally included in the dataset is listed and more detailed information on variable construction is given in the metadata and in the Technical Appendices. The report concludes with a discussion of the

potential for extending the dataset to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The dataset consists of the boundaries of the SOAs and associated tables in formats that allow data to be easily transferred into commonly used computer packages for analysis. A set of metadata for each variable provides full information about the sources and calculations used for its construction. The report, dataset and metadata use the same variable codes so that they can be cross-referenced with one another. SECRA (social and environmental conditions in rural areas) is the first publicly accessible dataset to describe both social and environmental characteristics of rural England at a common small area level. The interdisciplinary nature of the dataset makes it suitable for use in the production of integrated typologies of rural areas based on characteristics relevant to sustainable development. The dataset also allows practitioners to identify the SOAs falling within larger administrative units such as wards, districts and regions, so that these can be described in terms of their SOA characteristics.