Is Population Changing Around Casco Bay?

Answer: The population of the watershed is increasing.

Why Are Changing Demographics Important?

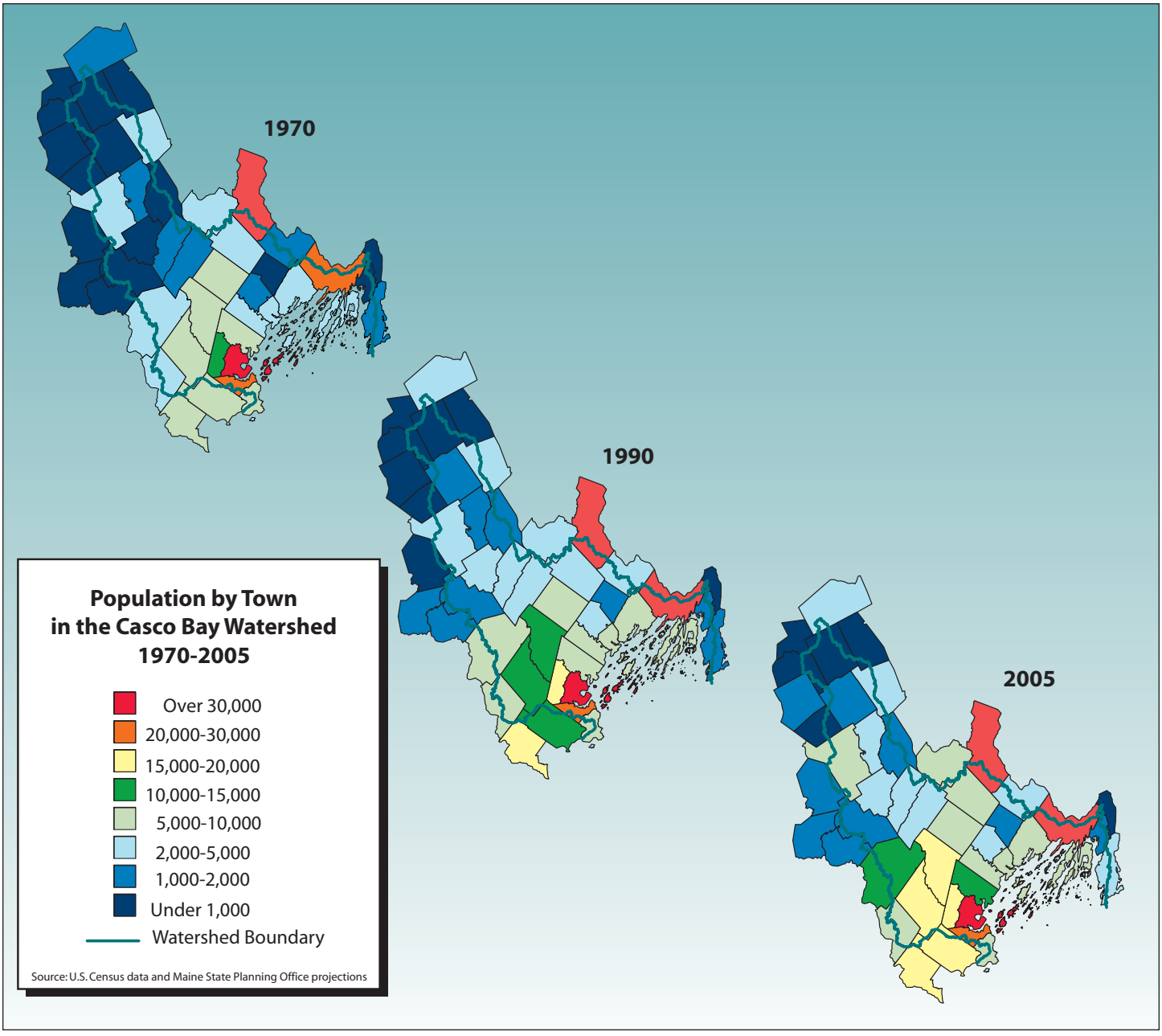
Assessing population change throughout the watershed provides insight about past and future patterns of economic growth, resource use, land development, and related pressures on ecosystems. Although demographic data describe only one facet of a complex socioeconomic system, tracking population change is important because population growth can be an underlying cause of ecosystem stress due to the expansion of transportation, housing, stormwater, sewer, and other built infrastructures needed to accommodate additional residents. Reviewing population information in conjunction with land use change and other indicators can explain changing demand for natural resources such as water, open space, or shellfish.

Population growth is projected to continue in the entire watershed, with a 6 percent increase over the next 10 years. Growing populations place development pressure on undeveloped lands and put more vehicles on local roads, driving sprawl-like development patterns, increasing impervious surface area, and compounding traffic congestion. For example, according to the Maine Bureau of Motor Vehicles website, vehicle registrations in Cumberland County increased from 215,141 to 283,943 between 1998 and 2003, an average annual increase of over 6%. In this way, population growth can be an indirect cause of air and water pollution in Casco Bay.

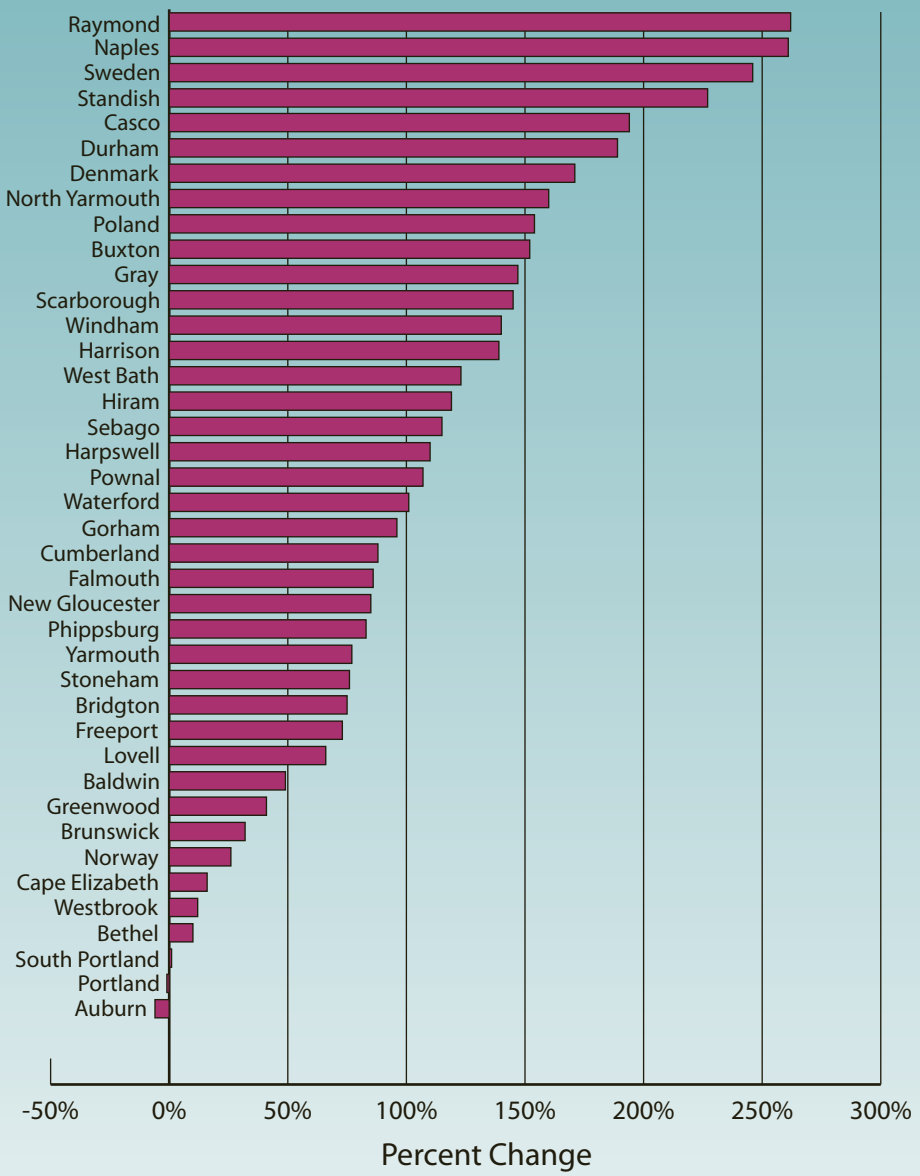
What Patterns of Population Change Are Occurring in the Watershed?

A review of population data throughout the watershed reveals two clear patterns. First, similar to national trends, Casco Bay's coastal communities are in the midst of a surge in population growth. Proximity to quality of life factors, employment opportunities, and primary transportation corridors contributes to coastal population growth. Second, formerly rural communities adjacent to the coastline are becoming suburban "bedroom" communities. Although population growth has shifted away from Portland and South Portland, whose populations have remained relatively constant, the populations of adjacent "bedroom" communities have grown rapidly over the last 30 years.

During the period between 1970 and 1990, almost 80 percent of total growth in the lower watershed took place in 11 suburban and rural communities: Brunswick, Windham, Scarborough, Standish, Gorham, Buxton, Yarmouth, Gray, Harpswell, Portland, and Freeport. To the south of Casco Bay, the combined populations of Saco and Scarborough have nearly tripled over the last 35 years from 13,535 in 1970 to an estimated 36,750 in 2005. Upper watershed communities adjacent to Sebago Lake and other freshwater bodies are experiencing a similar surge of population growth. The combined population of Naples, New Gloucester, Raymond and Standish has nearly tripled from 8,217 in 1970 to an estimated 23,675 in 2005.



Percent Change in Population of Municipalities in Casco Bay Watershed 1970-2005



Note: Historical population data are not available for Long Island, incorporated as a town in 1993.

Source: U.S. Census data, Maine State Planning Office projections

How Can This Information Be Used to Prepare for Future Growth?

Land use and transportation planners at the local, regional, state, and national scales are developing innovative ways to accommodate population growth while minimizing the impact of associated development on ecosystems. CBEP is working with state agencies and local municipalities to promote Low Impact Development (LID) which helps to minimize the impact of development on water resources. Examples of LID strategies are rain gardens, pervious pavement and green roofs (roofs which limit stormwater runoff by using plants to take up rain water). Smart growth promotes integration of centralized downtown development patterns with land conservation and alternative transportation. Using a third approach, conservation subdivision design, communities can maximize open space protection while maintaining development by allowing builders to cluster houses, leaving large areas of open land. All of these strategies contribute creative solutions to ecological impacts driven by rapid population growth.