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Redefining Absentee: Towards Understanding Place Attachment and Stewardship in Non-Residential Landowners in Texas, USA

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Abstract: Approximately 30% of the private land in Texas, USA is under absentee ownership. Understanding who absentee landowners are and their land management behaviors is vital for the protection of privately owned landscapes and the ecosystem services that they support, including surface water quality. By focusing on absentee landowners with properties in five watersheds in Texas, we utilized the theory of place attachment to gain insights into absentee landowners' land management decisions and their involvement in water quality conservation programs, such as watershed protection plans (WPPs). By conducting a mail-out survey, we obtained 100 responses, which were analyzed using an exploratory factor analysis and a series of nonparametric assessments. The results revealed that, contrary to the term "absentee", the landowners in our study demonstrated strong feelings of place attachment and heightened land stewardship. Based on these findings, we suggest that instead of considering absentee landowners as obstacles to collaborative conservation initiatives, such as WPPs, natural resource practitioners should recognize and capitalize on the emotional attachment that these landowners have to their properties, thereby fostering their involvement. By demonstrating the owner–land relationship and its behavioral outcomes among absentee landowners, this study provides a novel contribution to the existing literature on place attachment in the context of private land management and conservation.

Keywords: landownership; place attachment; stewardship; natural resource management; absenteeism

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1. Introduction

Nearly 40% of the surface waters in Texas do not meet water quality standards [1]. To address this issue, environmental agencies are turning to landscape-scale conservation efforts through watershed protection planning. A watershed protection plan (WPP) is a living document created to address surface water quality impairments within a watershed. Each WPP is unique—tailored to local land uses, demographics, and water pollution sources—and includes specific management measures along with a timeline of the plan's implementation [2]. WPP development involves partnerships among local stakeholders, university extension programs, river authorities, councils of government, and private consultants. Voluntary and non-regulatory WPPs rely on public education, outreach, and engagement.

The successful implementation of a WPP is unattainable without stakeholder involvement, including private landowners [3]. In Texas, where 95% of land is privately owned [4], engaging private landowners in conservation is paramount to protect water quality. There are 44 WPPs in Texas, and this number continues to grow [5]. If WPPs are implemented to improve water quality, stakeholder outreach and engagement are key. Therefore, absentee landowners (ALs)—who own land but do not use it as their primary residence—represent a unique group of stakeholders.

In Texas, ALs own approximately 31% of land, or more than 53 million acres [6]. While this number has not substantially changed in the past 25 years, ongoing intergenerational land transfer, with more than 40% of landowners aged over 65, is expected to alter this trend. Inheritors may have differing priorities or a lack of interest in land management, while high land market values and taxes might incentivize new landowners to subdivide or sell their inherited holdings [6,7]. Other factors contributing to the rise in ALs in Texas include declining average ownership sizes, increasing small landholdings, and the growing popularity of lifestyle-related reasons for landownership [8]. These dynamics underscore the necessity to develop effective outreach strategies inclusive of ALs' needs and priorities.

Compared to full-time landowners, ALs are less likely to participate in conservation due to the limited time spent on the land, disengagement from the land, insufficient land management experience, a lack of conservation knowledge, and limited contact with local natural resource professionals [9–11]. Although full-time residency and distance from the land help to distinguish ALs, scholars struggle to sufficiently explain ALs' heterogeneity and land management behaviors [12]. Limited research and the lack of a consistent definition further inhibit the understanding of this group [10]. To that end, little is known about ALs, a group who owns and possibly operates enough acreage to greatly affect watershed processes at the landscape scale. Specifically, their land management decisions are not well understood [10], including their motivations for landownership [13], engagement in conservation programs [11,14], and interactions within communities near the land's location [15]. Given the sheer amount of land in their ownership [16], ALs offer significant potential to protect the integrity of privately owned landscapes and the ecosystem goods and services that they support. Involving this segment of landowners in conservation initiatives helps to safeguard habitats, protect landscape connectivity, and foster community engagement, driving collaborative efforts towards shared environmental goals [9,11,13].

In this paper, we utilize the place attachment theory to better understand ALs' land management decisions and participation in conservation initiatives. We focus on five geographically disparate watersheds characterized by different levels of development density, stages of WPP implementation, and WPP management entities. This study offers a novel contribution to the literature on place attachment, private land conservation, and absentee landownership, while providing practical implications for watershed managers through empirical insights.

2. Background

About 40% of American landowners can be considered absentees—which are defined as non-operating landowners who reside outside of their land [16]—and this number is growing [10]. Their differing reasons for landownership and land management behaviors transform the social, ecological, and economic systems supported by rural lands, necessitating a better understanding of this unique segment of landowners and their impact on private land conservation [17,18].

2.1. Absentee Landowners' Profiles

Despite certain documented socio-demographic trends, ALs are not a homogeneous group. While there is no nationwide data source for ALs, the characteristics of non-operating landlords (NOLs)—many of whom are absentees—can help shed some light on ALs' profiles [12,18]. Of the 2 million landlords in the USA, NOLs make up 87% and are predominantly males, 65 years of age and older, and reside within 50 miles from their leased land [18,19]. In Texas, a typical NOL is a 69-year-old non-Hispanic white male who has inherited land and lives in a larger metropolitan center located approximately 106 miles away [18–20].

Some individuals become ALs as they retire from farming and lease their land, whereas others inherit or purchase land while residing elsewhere [21]. Compared to inheritors, land buyers often acquire land for financial reasons or lifestyle purposes such as recreation, privacy, and wildlife [6,15]. Some ALs are a subgroup of lifestyle-oriented landowners who

occasionally visit their land while living in urban areas, chasing lifestyle aspirations [10,22]. Lifestyle-oriented landowners are generally younger, well educated, and affluent, receiving income from off-land sources [21,23]. Sometimes referred to as "weekenders" [9], ALs typically do not prioritize profiting from their land [24]. Since they primarily own land to achieve a desired lifestyle, ALs may not have farming backgrounds or conservation knowledge [25]. However, they tend to express high levels of environmental concern [22], which—coupled with their lack of financial dependence on the land—offers a promising potential for engaging them in conservation [26].

In the United States, national land management policy lacks a direct focus on absentee landownership, though the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA NRCS) offers services that are potentially applicable to absentees [21]. Similarly, while explicit policies concerning Texas ALs are scarce, some state policies, like property tax exemptions, apply to this group [21]. The absence of a direct emphasis on absentee landownership in national and state policies, combined with the potential impact of absentee landownership on social, ecological, and economic systems supported by rural lands, underscores the need for a better understanding of this unique segment of landowners and their impact on private land conservation [17,18].

2.2. Environmental Stewardship

The understanding of ALs' land management behaviors remains limited [12,22]. Some researchers argue that ALs are inactive and disengaged managers due to being physically away from their land [15,27,28]. Others present contrasting evidence that ALs are active managers and stewards of their land [22,29,30].

The motivations for and obstacles to engagement in stewardship activities among ALs are poorly understood. The emerging evidence suggests that a presence of a residential building [31], a lack of financial dependence on the land [32,33], the desire to be a good neighbor [22], a larger parcel size [34], environmental concern [15], a higher frequency of visits [11], and socio-demographics [14,35] are among the predictors of stewardship. Conversely, barriers include perceived restrictions of conservation programs and implementation costs [11,36], a limited time spent on the land [29], a lack of information [17,22], and distance from the land [28,29]. Not all ALs exhibit uniform stewardship behaviors, as seen in the variations within this segment, as their adoption of conservation practices may vary by practice [29,37]. Moreover, scholars noted differences in land management approaches across AL categories: absentee forest owners tend to be more "passive", while absentee farmland and rangeland owners often hire managers for their land [21].

While distance from the land and residential status have been associated with a lack of stewardship [28,29], others argue that these two factors alone are insufficient to explain ALs' land management behaviors [10]. Rather, it is the quality of engagement with the land—or involvement in land management while on the land—that drives land stewardship activities [10]. Likewise, scholars argued that relying on geographic distance and residency alone limits the understanding of the complexity of ALs' land management behaviors [38].

Despite their interest, ALs' engagement in conservation programs is often restricted due to a lack of access to information about local initiatives and land management in general [9,22]. ALs often do not live in the community, and therefore, traditional communication and outreach methods may not be effective [39]. In their investigation of information sourcing among ALs, researchers have found that most information is obtained from local land services (e.g., state government agencies with regional offices), followed by neighbors and the internet [13].

2.3. Owner–Land Relationship

Land management behaviors across types of landowners, including absentees, have been investigated from the perspective of the owner–land relationship [40]. While research focusing on the relationship between ALs and their properties is limited, investigations

into the owner–land relationship across landowner categories can provide insights into understanding how ALs feel about their land [41–47].

The existing literature demonstrates that landowners are deeply connected to their land [36,42] and form relationships with their properties by drawing from land-related values, such as aesthetics, biodiversity, privacy and freedom, opportunities for recreation, family getaway, and control over their own space [26,38,47,48]. Family history, important memories, meaningful biophysical features, and spiritual beliefs associated with the land are among other significant contributors to the psychological owner–land connection [42,44,47].

The theory of place attachment and related concepts (e.g., sense of place) have been applied to investigate the relationship between the psychological owner–land connection and the land management behaviors of private landowners [38,45,49–51]. While the existing research indicates a positive relationship between place attachment and participation in conservation among various types of landowners [49,50,52], ALs' development of place attachment and its behavioral manifestation have not yet received sufficient scholarly attention [38,45,53]. Addressing this gap is essential for the development of effective outreach strategies to increase ALs' engagement in conservation programs.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. A Place Attachment Approach to Understand Absentee Landownership

Place is generally described by three attributes: location, materiality, and meaning [54]. Location can be relative or absolute, and materiality represents objective physical characteristics (e.g., climate and topography), but the meaning of place is complex. A place's meaning is the relational, ideational, and phenomenological features that denote significance and a sense of attachment to a place [54–56].

In a homogenized landscape of big-box stores, chain restaurants, and a lack of a third place, Americans often experience placelessness [57–59]. As a result, a space—such as undeveloped land that is not the primary residence in this case—is used to (re)create place through placemaking and place meanings [52,60,61]. Studies have linked environmental volunteerism and stewardship with individuals who have a greater sense of place [62]. As such, place meanings may be key to catalyzing collective action and stewardship efforts [63–67].

Various terms describe place meaning: a sense of place, place attachment, place dependency, belonging in place, and place identity [67]. These terms are not mutually exclusive; confusion over discrete definitions and usage has stalled theoretical progress [54,68]. Yet, most agree on the process of developing place-based meanings, with a sense of place being a primary construct that, once established, produces place attachment and place meaning [38,69–71]. Here, we avoid the nuances of semantics and pivot to an established place attachment theory.

Developed by Scannell and Gifford in their 2010 landmark publication [64], these processes are explained through the Person–Place–Process conceptual model. The Person aspect involves how place attachment occurs in a person—it may occur in a group (e.g., religious or historical) or individual (e.g., realizations or experiences) setting. The Place portion focuses on the social, natural, or built environment that a place produces. To understand the Process, there are three pathways: affect (e.g., love and happiness), behavior (e.g., reconstruction of place and proximity-maintaining behavior), and cognition (e.g., knowledge and memory) [61,72].

To our knowledge, the collective impact of the Person, Place, and Process aspects of place attachment on stewardship has not been addressed in research, nor with a focus solely on ALs. We argue that while the Person–Place–Process framework is informative, its practical application is limited. That is, describing the interrelationships among Person, Place, and Process lacks consideration of tangible real-world outcomes. The inclusion of outcomes, actions, and practices will enable a practical understanding of the place attachment theory by expanding its applicability. Furthermore, assessing the Place component in the framework more thoroughly could render the concept more accessible to scholars and practitioners [54]. Owning land on which one does not reside in a full-time capacity serves

as an intriguing testing ground to unpack the role of place attachment through the proxy of behaviors and practices [38,45,53].

3.2. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

In this study, we expand the framework of place-based processes to include (1) an assessment of relationships among the Person–Place–Process aspects of place attachment to better understand ALs' stewardship behaviors and (2) a stewardship component to improve the theory's applicability.

In our modified framework, the Person attributes are factual qualities concerning an individual's socio-demographic characteristics and landownership aspects, including their reasons for landownership, acquisition, length of ownership, land uses, distance to the land, and visit frequency and duration. The Process attribute focuses on an individual's relationship with their land and comprises the three psychological aspects of place attachment—cognition, behavior, and affect [61]. To encompass these attributes, we used a series of statements, such as "I feel spiritually connected to my land" (affect); "I own my land for recreation" (behavior); and "I own my land for wildlife management" (cognition). The Place attribute includes a landowner's stewardship actions facilitated through community connections (e.g., participation in community events and associations and communication with local environmental professionals) and conservation practices (e.g., conservation behaviors and plans for the future of their land).

In our theoretical framework, all attributes of place attachment are interdependent, where each element both influences and is influenced by the others. That is, an individual's relationship with their land is continuously sustained through the interactions among the Person, Place, and Process attributes (Figure 1). We tested the following hypotheses:

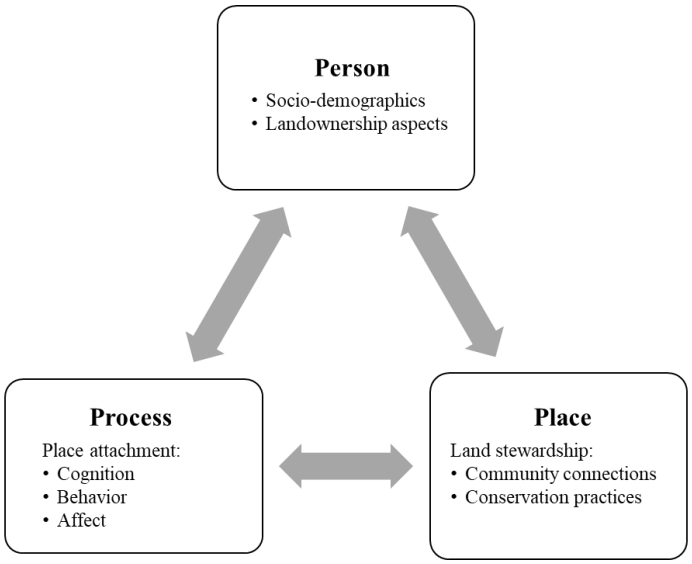

Figure 1. Conceptual framework and key survey measurements.

H1. *The motivations for landownership will vary across socio-demographic characteristic groups.*

H2. *Landowners who do not use their land to generate income and who assign personal place meanings to their properties will be more likely to engage in stewardship activities.*

H3. *The method of land acquisition, length of ownership, frequency of visits, and a landowner's extent of involvement in land management will differ across place meanings and motivations for landownership.*

3.3. Methodology

3.3.1. Study Sites

In 2022, 478—or nearly 40%—of the surface water in Texas was reported to be impaired [1]. As watersheds spread across jurisdictions, a WPP presents an effective strategy to restore surface water quality. In this study, we have chosen five watersheds with established WPPs across Texas. When selecting the watersheds, we aimed to encompass a range of rural, rather than urban, watersheds that vary by size, geographical locations, and managing entities (Figure 2).

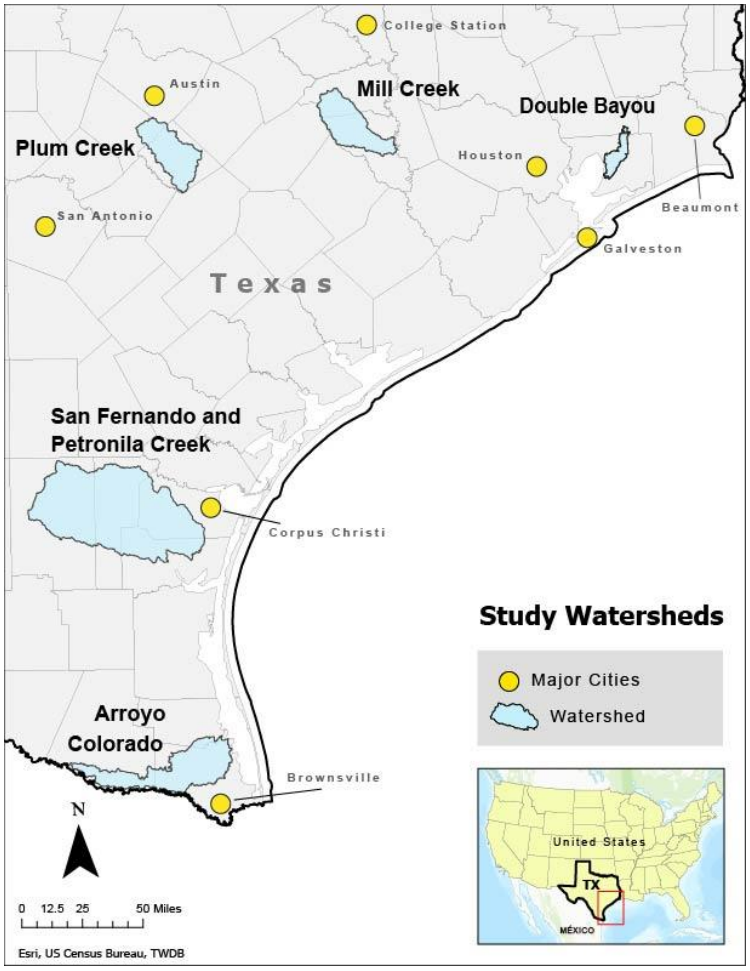

Figure 2. Study sites.

3.3.2. Data Collection

Similar to previous studies seeking to obtain information from ALs [10,22], we relied on a mail survey to reach our study participants. Our sample included ALs who owned land within the study sites. We define ALs as individuals who own properties exceeding 5 acres, not utilized as their primary residence.

The survey instrument consisted of 4 sections. Section 1 detailed the relationship with the land, including how and when the land was acquired, the frequency and duration of visits, reasons for landownership, and feelings about the land (place attachment). Section 2 inquired about land management practices, which included a series of conservation practices and conservation plans or program participation. Next, we asked how the landowners preferred to receive information about their land and what their plans were for their land in the future (e.g., sell/lease, gift, or conserve). The final section included a series of questions about the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

To reach our potential participants, we identified all counties within the watersheds and contacted county appraisal districts to collect the addresses of properties without a homestead exemption. The addresses were then imported into ArcGIS and geocoded as point features on a map, showing the spatial distributions of properties within the counties. Using the "Clip" function, we identified the addresses within each of the five watersheds. Next, we used a "Select by Attribute" query to exclude the addresses that were industrial and commercial properties [29], the addresses of properties under 5 acres, and duplicates. We then exported these data into Microsoft Excel and repeated the data cleaning process with manual scanning. The resulting addresses included properties with 5 or more acres without a homestead exemption, which fit our participant selection criteria. Using this dataset, we randomly selected 200 addresses from each watershed for a total sample of 1000 ALs. We then conducted a self-administered mail survey (Supplementary Materials) following a modified version of the Dillman Tailored Design Method [73], which included (1) an announcement letter, (2) a recruitment letter with a QR code and link to access the survey along with the option to request a paper copy, (3) a reminder containing a printed survey and business reply envelope, and (4) a final reminder letter with a QR code and link to access the survey online. As the Arroyo Colorado Watershed is located near the United States–Mexico border, we provided all materials in English and Spanish. We began the mailout campaign in November 2022 and completed data collection in August 2023.

3.3.3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using JMPro15 and SPSS. All data were cleaned, key measurement variables were standardized to a 5-point scale (5 = highest score, 1 = lowest score), and socio-demographic variables were combined as applicable. Following previous studies that assessed reasons for landownership and place attachment via a survey instrument [45,71,74], we first performed an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with the reasons for landownership. Then, we conducted a separate EFA on the series of place meaning statements. Our methodological rationale stemmed from the necessity to establish a categorical understanding of landownership motivations and determine what, if any, latent variables associated with place-based meanings exist within this specific cohort of ALs for subsequent nonparametric group comparisons to attend to our hypotheses of understanding patterns and trends among landownership characteristics, place attachment, socio-demographics, and stewardship activities.

The variables related to the reasons for landownership were tested for factorability using the Kaiser—Meyer–Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling as well as Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, which produced a KMO of 0.69, a p-value of <0.0000, and a chi-square value of 48.03, which is acceptable [75,76]. A maximum likelihood EFA was conducted, and 5 factors were retained based on the eigenvalues, scree plots, loadings, and cumulative variance in addition to theoretical reasoning [76,77]. An orthogonal rotation (Varimax) method was applied, and Cronbach's alpha was 0.80 for the statements related to reasons for landownership.

We conducted the same process—but used an oblique rotation (Quartimin) to reduce cross-loading—for the statements related to place meanings. These statements were tested for factorability using the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling as well as Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, which produced a KMO of 0.911, a p-value of <0.000, and a chi-square value of 671.339. Three factors were retained. Cronbach's alpha was 0.93 for these statements. We then used the EFA results to create groups, or categories of "factors", for both the reasons for landownership and place meaning statements. In nonparametric assessments, the category means—or composite scores of the categories—served as the measurement variables [77].

Second, we conducted Mann–Whitney and/or Kruskal–Wallis tests, depending on the number of groupings, to access differences and patterns among the categories and other key measurement variables from the survey (e.g., demographics). The category means were the measurement variable for the nonparametric assessments [77]. We also created

a Stewardship Index, which included behaviors that indicate a care for the land through community engagement (e.g., participating in workshops held near the land), enrollment in conservation plans and engagement with conservation agencies (e.g., conservation easements), and conservation practices (e.g., no-till farming and grass waterways). We assigned a binary code of 1 to those who participated in stewardship activities, and those who did not were assigned a binary code of 0. When this Stewardship Index was used as the measurement variable, we recoded the categories back into ordinal data for the nonparametric tests. If these comparisons resulted in statistically significant differences, pairwise comparisons were made using Dunn's Method to correct for multiple comparisons to determine the between-group differences.

4. Results

First, data were collected to understand the composition of absentee-owned acreage within each watershed. Our findings indicate that about 27% of the land in these watersheds is owned by ALs (Table 1), which reflects the statewide trend in Texas (31% of the total land area) [6]. The Mill Creek watershed had the highest percentage, accounting for 58% of the watershed area; the Double Bayou watershed had the second highest amount (49%), followed by the Arroyo Colorado watershed (26%), the San Fernando and Petronila Creeks watershed (23%), and the Plum Creek watershed (13%).

Table 1. Land in five selected watersheds owned by absentee landowners.

Watershed	Total Land Acres	Absentee-Owned Acres						WPP Est. (Year)	WPP Managing Entity
		Mean	Median	SD	Max	Total Acres	%		
Mill Creek	261,910	27.9	7.8	57	1605	151,209	58%	2016	Extension Service, Texas A&M University
Plum Creek	248,023	93.2	47.2	144	1463	31,880	13%	2008	Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority
Arroyo Colorado	419,635	5.6	0.2	29	1404.1	108,215	26%	2017	Research Institute, Texas A&M University
Double Bayou	60,514	11	0.6	51	1063.4	29,512	49%	2016	Research Institute, Houston Advanced Research Center
San Fernando and Petronila Creeks	1,247,102	30.9	2.6	88	1618	288,023	23%	2023	Research Institute, Texas A&M University
Total:	2,237,184					608,715.8	27%		

4.1. Survey Results

From our total attempted sample of 1000 ALs, we received 86 responses. The response rate was difficult to quantify as many landowners no longer resided at the addresses provided by the county appraisal districts. The response rate is detailed in the limitations.

4.2. Demographics of Respondents

The respondents were predominately male, non-Hispanic white, retired, and over the age of 55 (Appendix A). Most of them had at least some college education and a household income greater than USD 50,000. Among the respondents, 55% purchased their land, and 35% inherited their land. Financial dependency on the land varied. Most respondents reported that both their childhood and current settings could be described as rural. The frequency and duration of the visits varied: 49% of respondents visited their land daily, while 55% reported staying on their land for less than a day. The respondents lived about 58 miles from their land, owned about 292 acres for about 26 years, and were involved

with about four stewardship activities. These findings are not too dissimilar to the known profile of Texas NOLs (proxy for ALs) [16,18,19].

4.3. Exploratory Factor Analysis

The EFA results for the reasons for landownership produced five distinct factors: *Leisure*, *Game*, *Income*, *Production*, and *Public Access* (Table 2). Leisure contained statements such as owning land as a place to relax, retire, and recreate. Game attracted statements relating to hunting and fishing, wildlife management, and having a second home, assumable for hunting. Income involved statements noting that having land was an important source of income and that making money off their land was a priority. Production included livestock production and operating a farm or ranch. Finally, Public Access collected statements about a hunting enterprise and access for public recreation and education.

Table 2. EFA results for reasons for landownership.

	Factor 1	**Factor 2**	**Factor 3**	**Factor 4**	**Factor 5**
I own land to/as/for . . .	Leisure	Game	Income	Production	Public Access
have a place to relax	0.79				
have a place to retire	0.76				
enjoy the outdoors	0.73				
recreation (not hunting or fishing)	0.71				
hunt/fish (personal use)		0.86			
wildlife management		0.68			
have a second home/cabin		0.58			
an important source of income			0.92		
make money off my land (as a priority)			0.74		
livestock production				0.83	
operate a farm or ranch				0.58	
provide public access for recreation/education					0.85
maintain a hunting enterprise					0.68
Eigen values/SS loadings	4.66	3	1.50	1.42	1.14
Proportion variation (%)	16	13	11	9	8
Cumulative variation (%)	16	29	41	49	58
Measures of Fit	AIC	BIC	Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin	Root mean square error of approximation	Tucker–Lewis Index
	−34.40	−181.95	0.686	0.073	0.929

A second, separate EFA was conducted for the place meaning statements, and three factors were uncovered: *Connection*, *Culture*, and *Comfort* (Table 3). Connection had the most high-loaded statements, including the land being seen as a place to enjoy time with friends and family, create an ideal place, be a steward, feel happy, be spiritually connected, and appreciate natural features and special places. Culture involved two statements: "My land is a part of me" and "My land represents my family's culture and tradition". Finally, the Comfort factor included the following statements: "My land doesn't mean that much to me" (reverse coded) and "I feel happy when I am on my land".

Table 3. EFA results on place meaning statements.

	Factor 1	**Factor 2**	**Factor 3**
Feelings about your land . . .	Connection	Culture	Comfort
Natural features are an essential quality of my land.	0.97		
My land is a place for enjoying family and friends.	0.80		
I am free to create my unique ideal place on my land.	0.79		
My land provides the opportunity to be a steward.	0.76		
I miss my land when I am away.	0.71		
I feel happy when I am on my land.	0.68		
I feel spiritually connected to my land.	0.67		
There are places on my land that are special to me.	0.56		
My land represents my family's culture and tradition.		0.68	
My land has become a part of me.		0.66	
My land doesn't mean that much to me. (reverse coded)			0.55
I feel at home when I am on my land.			0.54
Eigen values/SS loadings	6.98	1.15	1.05
Proportion variation (%)	58	9.3	8.3
Cumulative variation (%)	58	67.5	76

Measures of Fit	AIC	BIC	Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin	Root mean square error of approximation	Tucker–Lewis Index
	−27.081	−106.902	0.911	0.047	0.992

4.3.1. The Motivations for Landownership Will Vary across Socio-Demographic Characteristic Groups

Variance was found among the socio-demographic characteristic groups for motivations for landownership. Males were more likely than females to own land for Game (p = 0.0059) and Income (p = 0.0283) reasons (Table 4). In the age categories, both the under 55 and 55–64 age groups trended more towards Leisure as a reason for landownership than the 74–85 group (p = 0.0203 and p = 0.0372, respectively). For age and Public Access, we obtained a p-value of 0.0341; the post hoc test (Dunn's) did not reveal significant differences, though the 55–64 age group scored the highest in Public Access compared to all groups (m = 2.25, out of 5). In terms of employment, we found that the full-time workers group trended more towards Leisure as a reason for landownership than the retired group (p = 0.0018).

Table 4. Reasons for landownership and socio-demographic characteristics.

Characteristic	Leisure	Game	Income	Production	Public Access	Post Hoc
				***p* (Chi-Square)**		
Gender	0.0949 (2.887)	0.0059 ** (7.6082)	0.0283 * (4.8072)	0.2935 (1.1035)	0.7774 (0.0799)	Female less likely than male (Game and Income)
Education	0.1118 (5.9966)	0.1543 (5.9117)	0.2492 (4.1157)	0.2628 (3.9875)	0.3672 (3.1627)	
Race/ Ethnicity	0.8498 (0.0359)	0.2473 (1.3387)	0.4992 (0.4567)	0.2062 (1.5978)	0.6563 (0.1981)	
Age	0.0105 * (13.1574)	0.2586 (5.2982)	0.2223 (5.7051)	0.6301 (2.5814)	0.0341 * (10.4081)	55–64 age group trends more towards Leisure than 75–84 age group (p = 0.0203); under 55 age group trends more towards Leisure than 75–84 age group (p = 0.0372)
Employment	0.0064 ** (14.2941)	0.2048 (5.9255)	0.7808 (1.7545)	0.0891 (8.0698)	0.2676 (5.1979)	Full-time group trends more towards Leisure than retired group (p = 0.0018)
Income	0.9012 (0.5790)	0.7765 (1.1025)	0.0523 (7.7158)	0.5098 (2.3141)	0.8535 (0.7833)	

NOTE: * indicates $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$.

4.3.2. Landowners Who Do Not Use Their Land to Generate Income and Who Assign Personal Place Meanings to Their Properties Will Be More Likely to Engage in Stewardship Activities

No significant differences were found among the stewardship indices across the factors associated with reasons for landownership (Table 5). However, stewardship trended more towards "Agree" (m = 3.5) than "Neutral" (m = 1, p = 0.0159) for measures of Connection (p = 0.0148), indicating that place attachment may be predictive of stewardship practices. An unidentifiable trend was observed between stewardship and Culture; the Wilcoxon test produced a significant p-value (0.0480), but the post hoc test (Dunn's) did not indicate any differences, although "Agree" scored the highest in Culture (m = 3).

Table 5. Stewardship Index and reasons for landownership and place attachment.

	Leisure	Game	Income	Production	Public Access
Stewardship Index	0.6934 (0.7324)	0.4996 (1.3881)	0.1255 (4.1511)	0.4251 (1.7107)	0.6551 (0.8460)
	Connection	**Culture**	**Comfort**	**Post hoc**	
	0.0148 * (5.9437)	0.0480 * (6.0750)	0.2288 (2.9499)	Trend more towards "Agree" [1] than "Neutral" for Connection. There is an unidentifiable trend between Culture and Stewardship.	

[1] Converted Factor composite scores organized into ordinal data: 1–2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, and 4–5 = agree. NOTE: * indicates $p \leq 0.05$.

4.3.3. The Method of Land Acquisition, Length of Ownership, Frequency of Visits, and a Landowner's Extent of Involvement in Land Management Will Differ across Place Meanings and Motivations for Landownership

Management of the land is an indicator of Connection (p = 0.0002) (Table 6). Those who self-managed their land (m = 4) trended more towards Connection—which is reflective of place attachment—than those who relied on lessees (m = 2) and family members

(m = 3) to manage their land. Distance also had a relationship with Connection, whereby those who lived more than 200 miles from their land were less likely to report feelings of connectedness to their land. A relationship may exist between years owned and Production (p = 0.0117), though this was not defined by a post hoc comparison. Likewise, a potential relationship between visit frequency and Leisure (p = 0.0273) was unidentifiable via the same test.

Table 6. Place attachment and land interactions.

	Connection	Culture	Comfort	Post Hoc
How land was acquired	0.8088 (0.9689)	0.1436 (5.4187)	0.8368 (0.8528)	
Visit frequency	0.0057 * (16.445)	0.3402 (5.6645)	0.0450) (11.3428)	
Duration of visits	0.5144 (3.2658)	0.4146 (3.9369)	0.1141 (7.4473)	
Years owned	0.4348 (3.7925)	0.1375 (6.9701)	0.0677 (8.7488)	
Who manages the land	0.0002 ** (24.1580)	0.1059 (9.0810)	0.0809 (9.8052)	Self (m = 4.3) and lessee (m = 2) Self and family members (m = 3.3)
Distance (miles)	0.0005 ** (19.9583)	0.3223 (4.6747)	0.0721 (8.5935)	200 or more (m = 3) differs as follows: less than 1 (m = 4.6), 1–15 (m = 4), and 50–150 (m = 4)

NOTE: * indicates $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$.

Regarding the reasons for landownership, significant differences were found among who manages the land and Leisure (p = 0.0001) (Table 7). The medians indicate that those who self-managed their land (m = 4) trended more towards Leisure than those who employed lessees to manage their land (m = 3, p = 0.0011), and that those who managed the land themselves trended more towards Leisure than those whose family members managed the land (m = 3, p = 0.0167). Similarly, distance from the land trended with those who owned land for purposes of Leisure, suggesting that those who resided in closer proximity to their land were more likely to own the land for reasons of relaxation than those who resided at farther distances (200 miles or more).

Table 7. Reasons for owning land and land interactions.

	Leisure	Game	Income	Production	Public Access	Post Hoc
			p-value (chi-square)			
How land was acquired	0.3284 (3.4418)	0.3348 (3.3940)	0.1397 (5.4821)	0.4415 (2.6924)	0.7864 (1.0613)	
Durations of visits	0.5329 (3.1056)	0.1536 (6.6826)	0.5528 (3.0298)	0.0247 * (11.1761)	0.9306 (0.8573)	Production: 1–2 days (m = 2.5) differs from less than 1 day (m = 4)
Visit frequency	0.0273 * (12.6074)	0.0639 (10.4331)	0.6337 (3.4322)	0.1492 (8.1306)	0.5843 (3.7614)	No statistically significant differences
Years owned	0.6345 (2.5566)	0.1684 (6.4430)	0.3940 (4.0859)	0.0117 * (12.9138)	0.5663 (2.9496)	Unidentifiable trend with Production: less than 5 years (m = 5) and more than 50 years (m = 5)
Who manages the land	0.0001 ** (25.4297)	0.0970 (9.3184)	0.6445 (3.3612)	0.1529 (8.0618)	0.8389 (2.0736)	Leisure trends more towards self (m = 4.2) than lessee (m = 3) and trends more towards self than family (m = 3.2)

Table 7. *Cont.*

	Leisure	Game	Income	Production	Public Access	Post Hoc
Distance (miles)	0.0028 * (16.1841)	0.1516 (6.7174)	0.5000 (3.3565)	0.3980 (4.0595)	0.7901 (1.7032)	Leisure: 200 or more (m = 2.5) differs from 1–15 (m = 4) and lessee than 1 (m = 4.5)

NOTE: * indicates $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$.

4.3.4. Landowners with Heightened Place Attachments Will Be Less Likely to Sell or Extract Resources from Their Land in the Near Future

No significant differences were found among the landowners' likelihood of implementing a conservation easement, applying for a special use valuation for agriculture or wildlife, gifting or donating all or part of their land, or leasing their land for energy production for the Connection, Culture, or Comfort factors (Table 8).

Table 8. Future plans and place attachment.

Likelihood of...	Connection	Culture	Comfort	Post Hoc
Implementing a conservation easement	0.4406 (3.7518)	0.2278 (5.6390)	0.0951 (7.9052)	
Applying for a special use valuation for ag or wildlife	0.1520 (6.7099)	0.1518 (6.7133)	0.1830 (6.2238)	
Lease all or part	0.0045 * (15.0861)	0.0323 * (10.5333)	0.0010 * 18.5414	Connection trends more towards "Very unlikely" (m = 4.4) than "Neither likely or unlikely" (m = 3.1) and trends more towards "Very unlikely" than "Unlikely" (m = 3.7) Culture trends more towards "Very unlikely" (m = 5) than "Unlikely" (m = 4) Comfort trends more towards "Very unlikely" (m = 5) than "Unlikely" (m = 4) and trends more towards "Very unlikely" than "Neither likely nor unlikely" (m = 4)
Pay someone to manage?	0.2828 (5.0444)	0.3139 (4.7505)	0.0130 * (12.6764)	Comfort trends more towards "Very unlikely" (m = 5) than "Neither likely nor unlikely" (m = 4)
Sell all or part	0.0755 (8.4795)	0.0604 (9.0277)	0.0129 * (12.6953)	Comfort trends more towards "Very unlikely" (m = 5) than "Neither likely nor unlikely" (m = 4)
Gift/donate all or part	0.0413 * (9.9482)	0.0959 (7.8855)	0.0191 * (11.7718)	No statistically significant differences
Energy production (oil/gas/renewable)	0.7862 (1.7249)	0.6637 (2.3941)	0.7110 (2.1346)	

NOTE: * indicates $p \leq 0.05$.

For Connection, the likelihood of landowners to lease all or part of their land in the next two years trended towards "Very unlikely" (m = 4) rather than "Unlikely" (m = 3.8, $p = 0.0298$) or "Neither likely nor unlikely" (m = 3, $p = 0.0112$). For Connection, the likelihood of gifting or donating all or part of their land in the next two years showed possible significance ($p = 0.0413$), though the post hoc analysis did not illuminate any particular differences. Regarding Culture, the likelihood of landowners to lease all or part of their land in the next two years trended more towards "Very unlikely" (m = 5) than "Unlikely" (m = 4, $p = 0.0292$).

Comfort showed that the likelihood of landowners (a) leasing all or part of their land in the next two years trended more towards "Very unlikely" (m = 5) than "Unlikely" (m = 4, $p = 0.0014$) and trended more towards "Neither likely nor unlikely" (m = 4) than "Very unlikely" ($p = 0.0134$), and (b) paying someone to manage their land trended more towards "Very unlikely" (m = 5) than "Neither likely nor unlikely" (m = 4, $p = 0.0081$). The likelihood of landowners selling all or part of their land in the next two years trended more towards "Very unlikely" (m = 5) than "Neither likely nor unlikely" (m = 4, $p = 0.0081$). As with Connection, there was a trend among landowners' likelihood of gifting or donating all or part of their land in the next two years that was not identifiable from a post hoc analysis ($p = 0.0191$).

5. Discussion

Our research expands on the existing body of literature by focusing on an understudied group of landowners—absentees—thus advancing the application of place attachment as a powerful concept to explain ALs' land management behaviors. Gaining insights into how these individuals' land management actions affect private land stewardship is especially important in places like Texas, where ALs possess nearly one-third of the state's land [6]. With a projected 40% population increase in the next 30 years and a loss of working lands [78–81], the growing demand for private lands in Texas underscores the importance of engaging ALs in conservation. Utilizing the theory of place attachment, our study seeks to provide a better understanding of ALs' land management decisions and their participation in conservation practices, specifically WPP-driven initiatives. When interpreting our findings, it is important to note that, since we used an EFA rather than a confirmatory factor analysis, we cannot directly tie place-based meaning terminologies to our results; rather, we can broadly understand how place facilitates land stewardship activities.

5.1. Implications for Practitioners

The results paint a compelling picture: in contrast to the label of "absentee", the landowners in our study were far from absent in their engagement with their land. Drawing from this observation, we suggest that natural resource practitioners should focus on the development of education and conservation opportunities that appeal to this subgroup by recognizing that these landowners are not "absent" or "distant" from the landscape. By acknowledging ALs' feelings of attachment to their land and leveraging these emotional bonds into action, practitioners can increase engagement.

We further recommend tailoring outreach efforts to consider land proximity and management priorities (e.g., recreation, wildlife management, and livestock production). Our results show that absentees who live within 200 miles of their land tend to manage the land themselves and exhibit stronger feelings of attachment to the land. To capitalize on this, watershed managers should develop a list of ALs and reach out to them directly via mail and phone calls to increase their awareness of the local conservation issues, education opportunities, and available assistance.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

Despite our success in obtaining information from a group that is notoriously difficult to reach, this study has several limitations. One of them concerns a small sample size and the nonresponse bias [82]. Despite our efforts to condense our survey, lengthy online and paper surveys may result in lower response rates [82,83]. Additionally, a potential bias may exist within our participant group, stemming from self-reported behaviors and an increased likelihood that landowners invested in their land may be more inclined to respond to a survey regarding land management practices. However, we observed that our respondents' demographic characteristics were generally consistent with the established ALs' profiles [16,18,19].

To conduct this study, we worked with county appraisal districts, some of which had limited data management capabilities, leading to challenges such as incorrect records. For

example, after disseminating the survey in one watershed, we encountered an abnormal number of returned surveys and phone calls from the recruited participants reporting discrepancies between the names and addresses on the surveys they received, resulting from incorrect county records. After becoming aware of this issue, we mailed out the surveys in phases, i.e., one watershed at a time. We took special care to mail test batches of surveys to approximately 25 landowners within a watershed and monitored the number of returns received for 3 weeks. If we did not receive an unusually high number of returned surveys, we proceeded to recruit the remaining 175 landowners from that watershed. As such, we were unable to check for nonresponse bias within our sample.

Future studies should consider more robust recruitment methods and criteria for ALs, for example, by first identifying riparian areas of concern and then assessing ownership through public records for a more targeted recruitment method. Future studies should also strive to obtain a more demographically diverse sample, i.e., a greater percentage of landowners who identify as non-white and female [84].

An additional suggestion involves refining the methodological definition of ALs. Some participants shared that they did not consider themselves absentees because their land was close to their primary residence. Establishing specific criteria, such as a minimum distance to the land, could better define absentee-owned properties in relation to a landowner's residence. Finally, this line of research would benefit from interviews with ALs to further explore their emotional attachment to properties and how physical absence may enhance their affection for the land.

6. Conclusions

This research contributes to the body of knowledge on ALs' land management behaviors by offering a unique lens to understand how the different aspects of placemaking affect the formation of place attachments. To attend to this objective, we refined the Person–Place–Process framework [64] by including conservation practices and community connections as the outcomes of one's relationship with place. To our knowledge, no previous studies have employed this framework to assess the relationship between place attachment and stewardship. In this sense, this study is one of the first studies to assess land stewardship as a behavioral outcome of place attachment among ALs. Our approach has enhanced the relevance of the Person–Place–Process framework for understanding land management behaviors among ALs by demonstrating how its application leads to measurable land management through assessing conservation practices and community connections [10,30].

Perhaps the most compelling finding of our research is the profound sense of place attachment exhibited by ALs. This observation challenges the accuracy of the term "absentee", as these individuals are anything but absent in their emotional connection to and engagement with their land. This recognition is crucial, especially in Texas, a privately-owned state, where all landowners—whether absentees or not—are key stakeholders in conservation.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/geographies4010007/s1. Supplementary Materials: A self-administered mail survey following a modified version of the Dillman Tailored Design Method.

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Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality considerations to the landowners.

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Appendix A

Respondents' Socio-Demographics	Categories	Distribution % (Raw Count)
Gender (n = 80) [1]	Male	73% (58)
	Female	28% (22)
Race/Ethnicity (n = 80) [2]	White	74% (59)
	Non-white	26% (21)
Employment Status (n = 80)	Full-time	38% (30)
	Part-time	3% (2)
	Self-employed	10% (8)
	Retired	49% (39)
	Unemployed	1% (1)
Age (n = 81) [3]	Under 55	16% (13)
	55–64	26% (21)
	65–74	37% (30)
	75–84	14% (11)
	85+	7% (6)
Educational Attainment (n = 79)	High school graduate, GED, or less	17% (13)
	Some college/associate/technical	33% (26)
	Four-year college degree	29% (23)
	Advanced degree	22% (17)
Household Income (n = 70)	USD 0–50,000	14% (10)
	USD 50,000–100,000	34% (24)
	USD 100,000–150,000	20% (14)
	USD 150,000 or more	31% (22)
Financial dependency on land		
My land is an important source of income. (n = 82)	Strongly agree	12% (10)
	Agree	23% (19)
	Neutral	21% (17)
	Disagree	26% (21)
	Strongly disagree	18% (15)
Making a profit off my land is a priority. (n = 82)	Strongly agree	12% (10)
	Agree	23% (19)
	Neither	26% (21)
	Disagree	22% (18)
	Strongly disagree	17% (14)
Making money off my land is not my goal. (n = 82)	Strongly agree	20% (16)
	Agree	20% (16)
	Neither	30% (25)
	Disagree	22% (18)
	Strongly disagree	9% (7)

Respondents' Socio-Demographics	Categories	Distribution % (Raw Count)
I have a special use valuation for agriculture or wildlife management to reduce taxes. (n = 81)	Strongly agree	31% (25)
	Agree	37% (30)
	Neither	9% (7)
	Disagree	12% (10)
	Strongly disagree	11% (9)
Land characteristics and dynamics		
How land was acquired (n = 86)	Received as gift	5% (4)
	Purchased	55% (47)
	Inherited	35% (30)
	Other	6% (5)
Childhood setting (n = 79)	Rural, farm	38% (30)
	Rural, non-farm	8% (6)
	Small town	29% (23)
	Urban	10% (8)
	Suburban	15% (12)
Current setting (n = 79)	Rural, farm	44% (34)
	Rural, non-farm	8% (6)
	Small town	28% (22)
	Urban	6% (5)
	Suburban	13% (10)
	Other	1% (1)
Distance from land (miles) (n = 78) [4]	Range	0–900
	Median	10
	Mean	58
	SD	131
Visit frequency (n = 82)	Daily	49%
	Weekly	24%
	Monthly	9%
	Several times a year	9%
	Once a year	5%
	Less than once a year	5%
Visit duration (n = 73)	Less than 1 day (e.g., a few hours)	55%
	1–2 days	12%
	3 days–1 week	7%
	2 weeks–1 month	1%
	Longer than 1 month	25%
Acres owned (n = 85)	Range	6–7760
	Median	60
	Mean	296
	SD	899
Years owned (n = 81)	Range	2–100
	Median	21
	Mean	26
	SD	19
Stewardship activities [5]	Range	0–18
	Median	3
	Mean	3.9
	SD	4

[1] "Non-binary/Third gender" and "Prefer not to say" were offered as response options but did not receive any selections. [2] All other racial/ethnic categories were available for selection; groups were combined due to low count. [3] Age groupings under 55 years were combined due to low count. [4] Seven respondents claimed to live on their land and were removed from analysis. [5] Conservation planning and practices, engagement with land management professionals and community events.

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