

2007

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Recommended Citation

Hayden, J. Michael (2007) "Were the Poppers Right? Outmigration and the Changing Economy of the Great Plains," *Online Journal of Rural Research & Policy*. Vol. 2: Iss. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/ojrrp.v2i2.36>

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Were the Poppers Right? Outmigration and the Changing Economy of the Great Plains

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Recommended Citation Style (MLA):

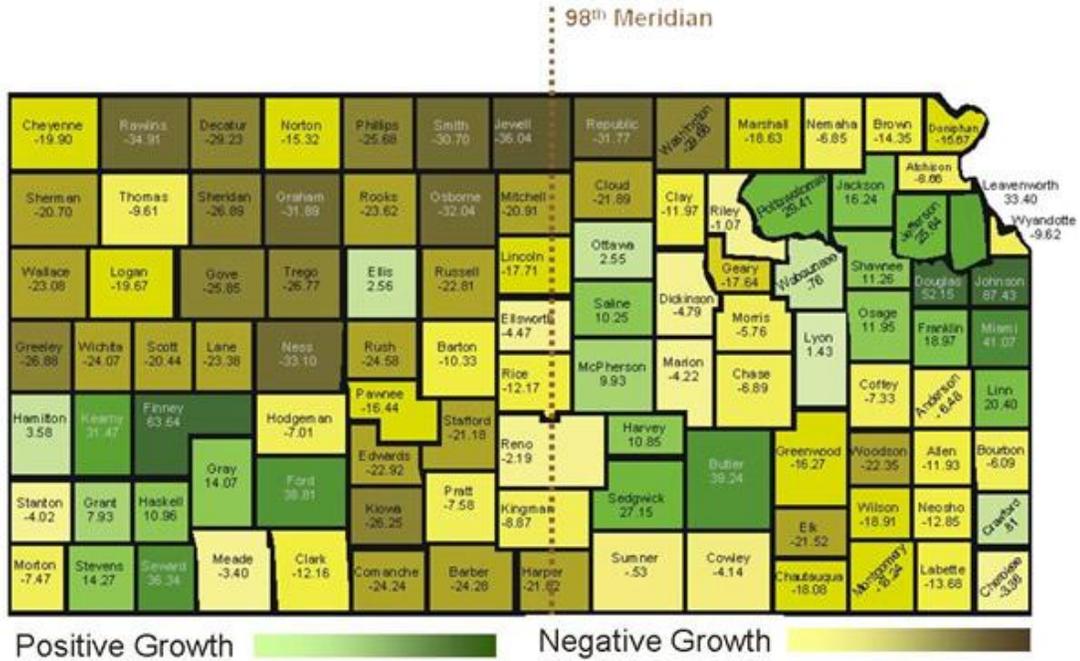
Hayden, Michael J. "Were the Poppers Right? Outmigration and the Changing Economy of the Great Plains." The Online Journal of Rural Research and Policy 2 (2007): 1-7.

Keywords: Metropolitan, The Buffalo Commons: Its Antecedents and Their Implications, Deborah, Popper, Frank, 1987, Great Plains, literary metaphor, public-policy proposal, futurist prediction, ecological restoration project, excesses, boom-and-bust, cycles, over settlement, overuse, economic and ecological collapse, population decline, mixed-grass, Plains, fewer cattle, more environmental protection, less extraction, ecotourism, conventional rural development, rural, research, academic, peer-reviewed, university, college, geography, sociology, political science, architecture, law, science, biology, chemistry, physics, leadership studies, community service, agriculture, communications, mass communications, new media, Internet, web, Hayden, former governor, tourism, director, Kansas, Secretary, Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, 41st governor.

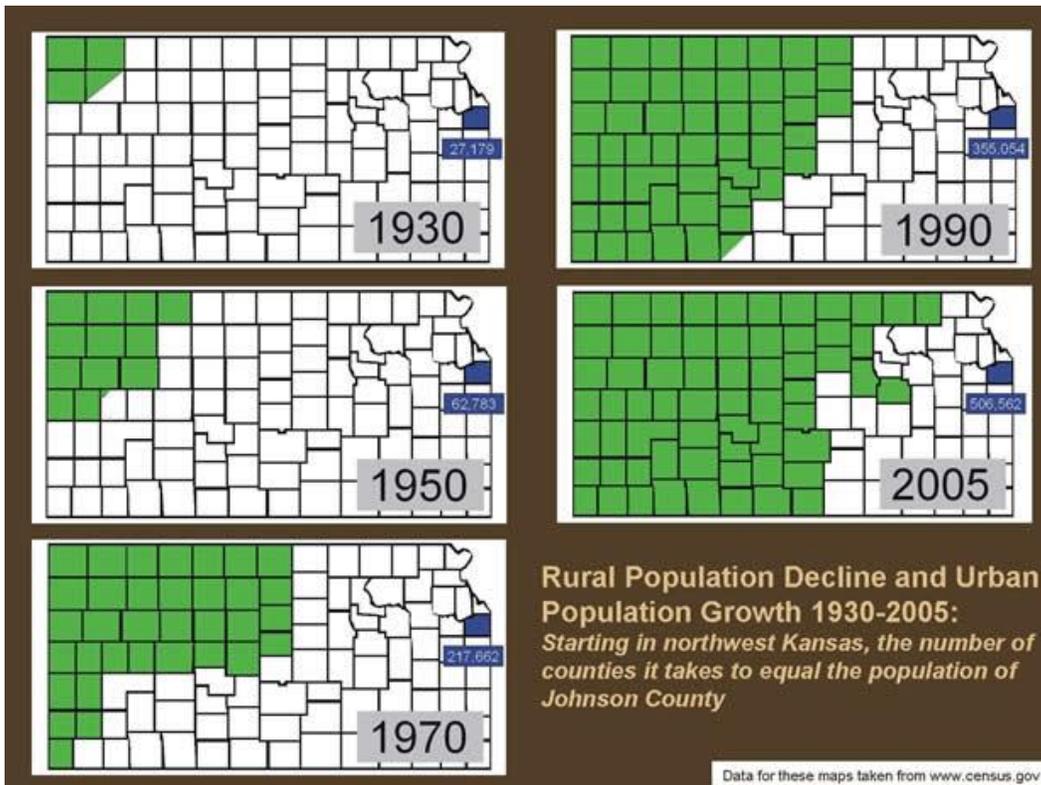
I was born and raised west of the 100th meridian and lived close to the land and people of western Kansas for more than 40 years. When I entered high school, I set a goal of knowing everyone in the school within two weeks and I accomplished that. I also knew the name of every street in town, thanks to my having a paper route.

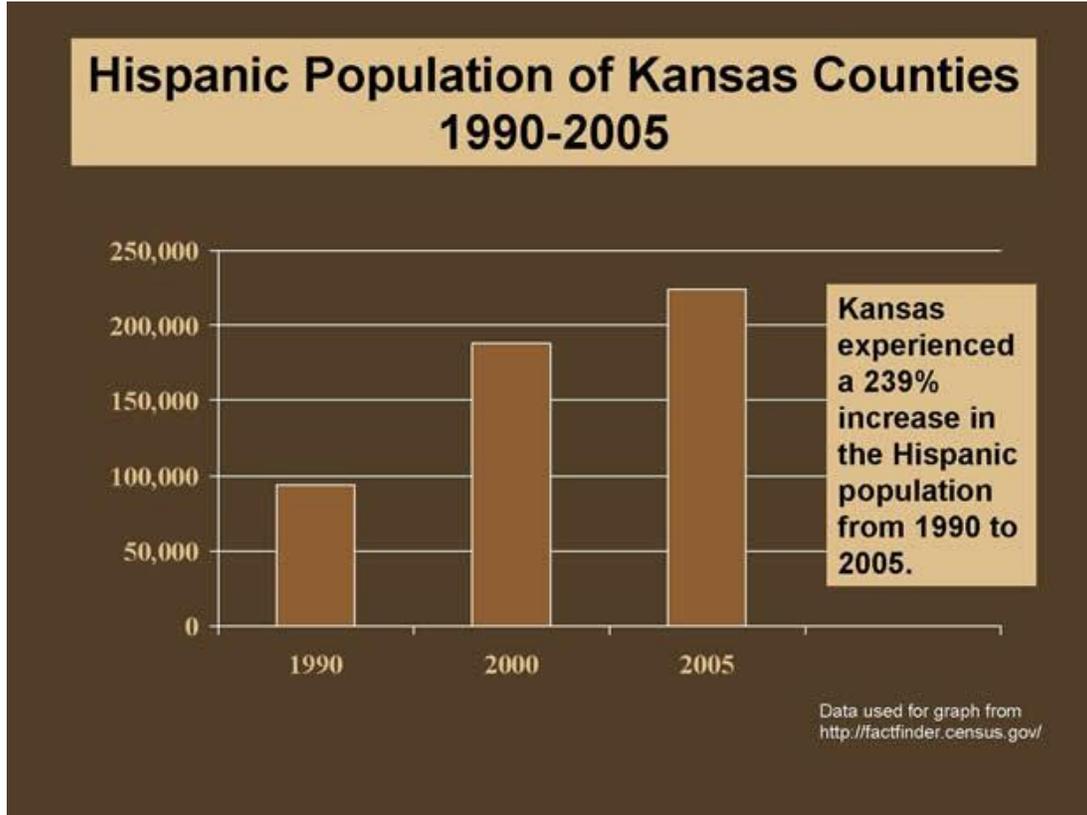
Within my lifetime, I have seen dramatic changes in both the land and people. When the Poppers first introduced their Buffalo Commons idea, I was governor and I came out guns blazing like Matt Dillon. Like many Kansans, I wondered what two East Coast academics could possibly know about the Great Plains. Seventeen years later, I must admit I was wrong. In some areas, from Alberta to the Rio Grande, the depopulation has been even greater than what the Poppers predicted. That was disappointing to me as my families' roots are deep in western Kansas. My mother and father built a house in Atwood and lived at that same address for 51 years. During that same time period, I've had 29 different mailing addresses, exemplifying changing lifestyles.

In the charts below you can see how the population of Kansas is changing. The first chart is a map showing the percentage of change in population by county from 1980-2005. You can see that the entire northern tier of counties is losing population at an alarming rate. The northwest counties, and areas between Wichita and Dodge City, as well as southeast Kansas counties, are all dramatically losing population. Most of the growth is in the suburban areas surrounding Wichita, and in the Kansas City to Topeka corridor. There is also significant growth in the southwest due to the influx of Hispanic population attracted to meat packing and associated industries. The second chart is a set of five maps showing the relationship between the population of Johnson County and the rest of Kansas. The third chart shows the growth of the Hispanic population. All three charts clearly illustrate how the population demographic of Kansas is changing.



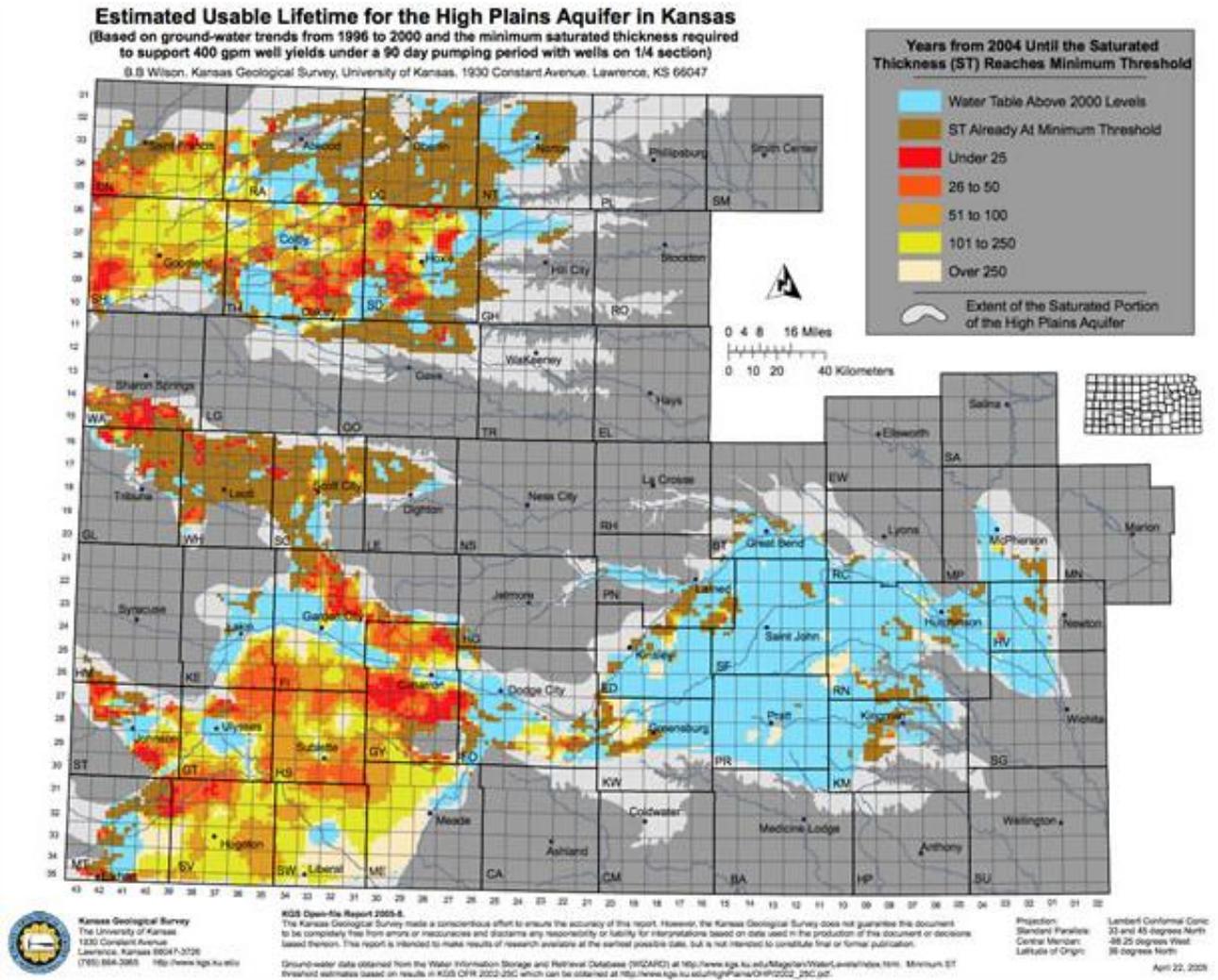
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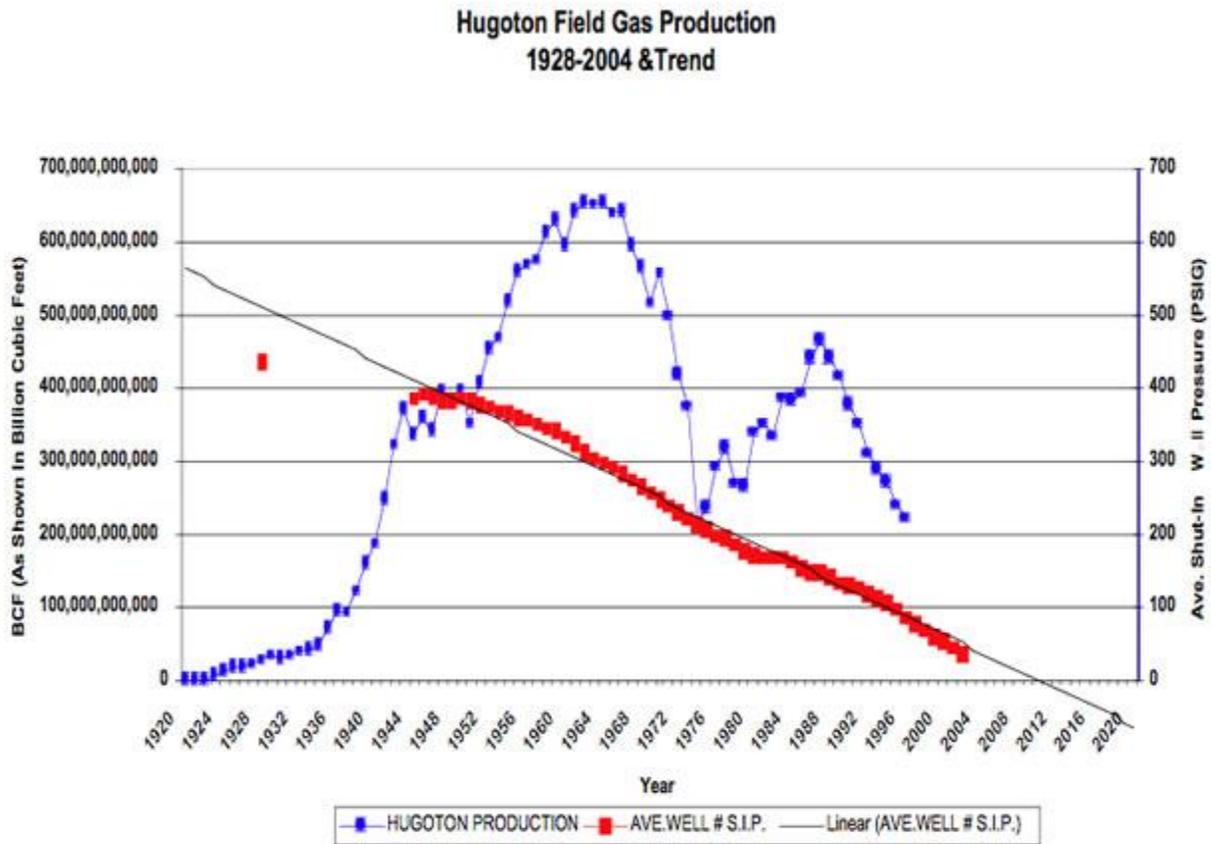


In large part, for Kansas as well as across the entire Great Plains, these changing demographics have been driven by economic factors. In northwest Kansas, where our family farm is located, the primary livelihood for the people living there has been dry land farming or ranching. Our family has owned the same farmland for over 90 years. In 1963, there were 16 of us whose primary livelihoods came from that land. In 2007, that land provides the major income for only four people, three of whom are over 80, and the land is just as productive as ever. Fifteen years from now, there may be only 1 person supported primarily by our land.

Southwestern Kansas depends on a three-legged economy based on the Hugoton gas fields, the beef processing industry, and irrigation farming. Based on the viability of these economic factors, this region has, so far, avoided the dramatic population declines experienced in the northwestern areas and other parts of Kansas. However, the natural resource underpinnings of the southwestern economy are disappearing. The gas fields are being depleted, and water withdrawals from the Ogallala Aquifer are outstripping the natural recharge of this massive underground reservoir that has sustained decades of irrigation.



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These declines in natural resource availability give rise to the pressing questions about the future of Kansas. I was once driving through Courtland, Kansas, while running for governor, and had stopped for a train. While waiting at the railroad crossing, I thought about what I could do for the people of Courtland if I were elected governor. That question still haunts me and the answer still eludes me. However, the Poppers challenged us to think about that issue.

Although I still do not know what the best answer is for people in Courtland, in my experiences over the years I have continued to give a lot of thought about the trend of a disappearing rural America. To slow, or hopefully even flatten out this trend, I believe that the three strategies key to the survival of rural communities in the Great Plains are government investment, economic diversification, and resource conservation.

Across Kansas, communities that are surviving and growing are those that are centered on government infrastructure. Community leaders in Hays, Liberal, and Garden City, for example, have invested heavily in the development of colleges and universities, hospitals and health care facilities, and highways which spawn more diverse business and industry. This government commitment illustrates how responsive visionary leadership can influence demographic changes.

A commitment to wise government investment is an integral part of my position as Secretary of the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks. I frequently discuss the need for, and value of,

more public land in Kansas. Currently, Kansas ranks 49th among the states in the percentage of public land available for its citizens. Only Connecticut ranks lower. Much of the reason for this ranking is because our state has a deep-rooted personal property rights tradition. This mindset seemingly does not want to recognize that public land is a way to diversify the rural economy because of the outdoor recreation and ecotourism opportunities it offers. Public land offers a way to diversify the rural economy as it promotes outdoor recreation and ecotourism on a renewable basis. Among the few places in western Kansas where people congregate are public recreational lands.

Cedar Bluff State Park, for example, is available because state and local government leaders understand the advantages public recreational lands offer. Developed in the early 1960s, this state park annually attracts more than 150,000 visitors. The park's aesthetic and recreational appeal draws a steady flow of visitors from Kansas and many other states. In addition to the quality of life advantages the state parks offer, Cedar Bluff and the other 23 state parks in Kansas contribute significantly to local, regional and state economies. State park visitors purchase more than \$200 million annually in fuel, food, recreational gear, and other commodities and supplies from Kansas businesses. Those purchases generate about 2,000 jobs, \$46 million in wages, and \$13 million in state sales taxes.

In addition, all across the state are other public recreational areas that provide local and state economic impacts. However, as long as we have a mentality that resists government investment in the form of public lands, the rest of the world, and even our own citizens, will not be able to see, access and benefit from what Kansas has to offer.

Kansas has a compelling and unique history. We're blessed with a diverse array of landscapes and natural resources. Yet, many of our state's residents are unaware and unappreciative of these resources. In Kansas we've never seemed to have had enough pride in our own natural and historical resources. Coronado Heights is covered with graffiti. Pawnee Rock is partially bulldozed and covered with trash.

This uncaring mentality about conserving the natural beauty of Kansas will also deprive future generations of the opportunity to experience the splendor of unique natural areas. Although private landowners have graciously allowed public access, three very unique geological and archaeological sites in Kansas —Castle Rock, Monument Rocks and the El Cuartelejo ruins— have suffered deterioration. Natural deterioration of these sites is inevitable, but activities by the public such as climbing and vandalism exacerbate deterioration. Government stewardship at sites like these offers the best opportunity to properly protect them.

My hope is that we can foster a far more caring attitude towards this magnificent state we call Kansas. First and foremost, we must respect our land, preserve it and protect it. In concert with these responsibilities, we as Kansans need to provide for a diversified and sustainable rural economy. To do that will require a commitment to the wise use of our natural resources and reasonable access to them. If, instead, we choose to continue following the road we are traveling, we may well become part of the Buffalo Commons the Poppers predicted.

Author Information

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41st Governor of Kansas, 1987-1991
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Former Kansas Governor Mike Hayden was officially appointed by Governor Kathleen Sebelius to be the Secretary of the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks on January 2, 2002. As a cabinet-level agency, the Department of Wildlife and Parks is administered by a Secretary of Wildlife and Parks and is advised by a seven member Wildlife and Parks Commission.

Raised in the rural town of Atwood, Kansas, Secretary Hayden developed a passion for the out-of-doors. He graduated from Kansas State University with a Bachelor's degree in Wildlife Conservation and received a Master's degree in Biology from Fort Hays State University.

Secretary Hayden served as Speaker of Kansas' House of Representatives from 1983 until 1987, and as the 41st Governor of Kansas from 1987 until 1991. Soon thereafter, President Bush appointed him Assistant Secretary of Interior for Fish, Wildlife and Parks. In 1993, Secretary Hayden became the President of the American Sportfishing Association, a non-profit trade association working to benefit America's fishing resources and the sportfishing industry.

He served as a Commissioner on the Pew Oceans Commission, an independent group of American leaders conducting a national dialogue on the policies needed to restore and protect living marine resources in U.S. waters.

Secretary Hayden has also served as Chair of the League of Conservation Voters and as Vice Chair for the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation. While in Washington, he served as Acting Chairman of the Migratory Bird Commission from 1991 until 1993 and as Board Member of the North American Wetlands Conservation Council from 1993 until 1996.

In 1995, he was awarded the prestigious Chevron-Times Mirror Conservation Award, becoming the fourth Kansan to receive the award in its 25-year history. In March of 1996, he was awarded the very first Hunting Heritage Award by the National Wild Turkey Federation. He received this award again in 2004. In 1997, he also received "A Special One-Time Conservation Award" from the Kansas Natural Resource Council.

During his military service in Vietnam he was awarded the Bronze Star for Valor, the Soldier's Medal for Heroism and the Vietnamese Gallantry Cross.

Secretary Hayden is an ardent conservationist and outdoorsman with a lifelong interest in fishing, hunting, canoeing and whitewater rafting. He enjoys fly tying, mushroom hunting, bird watching and collecting antique fishing lures.

Mike and Patti Hayden reside in Lawrence, KS, and are the proud parents of two daughters. Their eldest daughter, Chelsi, is a recent graduate of the University of Kansas Law School. Annie attends Kansas State University.