

Amenity-led Change in Rural Towns and Regions

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Drawing from research and planning praxis mainly in western USA, and to a less extent in Canada and Europe, below is a brief outline of what amenity migration is, several key issues it presents for local and regional planning, and what is being done about it for rural communities and their natural ecologies.

1. What is Amenity Migration?

Amenity migration (AM) refers to the permanent and part time movement of people, *amenity migrants* (AMs), to places principally because of their actual or perceived higher environmental quality and cultural differentiation (**Image 1**). Others who move primarily for economic gain may be called *economic migrants* (EMs), and the term *amenity-led migration* (ALM) is suggested when considering both amenity migrants and economic migrants (Moss 1994, 2006). From especially a planning and management perspective, capital that follows without its owners migrating should also be included (**Image 2**) (Green *et al* 2005; Glorioso & Moss 2007). To date knowledge about the contemporary human movement to mountainous regions and its management focuses on tourism. But, amenity migration is now an equal or greater societal force — one much less is known about, and also one often confused with tourism.

A pattern has emerged, perhaps especially in mountain areas, of amenity migration being commonly the result of a coalescence of the following key motivating and facilitating factors. There are two meta-motivators of this change agent: higher societal valuing of the natural environment and differentiated culture. Nested within these are the other key motivators: leisure, flight from large city negative conditions, economic opportunity, learning (including spiritual and aesthetic motivation) and climate change (Moss, in press). The economic motivator referred to here is a secondary one compared to natural and cultural amenities; not the primary one that drives economic migrants. Integrated with these motivators are a set of key facilitators of this late-modern mobility: access-facilitating technology (communications and transportation), discretionary wealth, land availability (or cost), discretionary time, and destination comfort amenities. (**Image 3**) illustrates this pattern, particularly for western North America today. The gradation in typeface size of factors indicates their contemporary comparative importance; larger for greater importance. The significance of these factors has changed over time. For example, some two decades ago the general importance of discretionary time was seemingly greater. Comparatively high land

availability has been a strong facilitator of amenity seekers, however particularly in wealthier countries, this key factor is shifting to a negative value in high amenity mountain locations as land availability decreases and its cost increases. Also, the impacts of climate change have recently appeared as a key motivator, and one that is likely to increase in importance (Moss 2006, in press).

2. Selected Key Amenity Migration Planning Issues

2.1 *An Opportunity and a Threat*

Amenity-led change is both a benefit and threat. However, it seems that as we diminish the quality of our natural environment and homogenizes our cultures, paradoxically many value these amenities more highly, which results in increasing amenity migration and further degrading of ecosystems and cultures. This is a process detrimental to the inhabitants of both mountains and lowlands for they share a dependence on mountains for utilitarian and intrinsic benefits. Yet, continuation of this degradation is the probable future if we do not substantially improve our understanding of amenity migration and our capability and determination to plan for and manage it in a sustainable manner (Moss 1994, 2006; Powers 1996; Glorioso 1999, 2006). The main benefits of amenity-led change to date appear in the economic realm. However, rural communities planning for an economic return from residential development must carefully weigh new property tax income against accompanying new migrant's demands for additions to governmental facilities and services.

2.2 *The Attraction of both Natural & Cultural Amenities*

Natural amenities (**Image 4**) are generally more easily identified and worked with than cultural amenities for communities and their planners (see Moss 2006 p 8-9 for definitions). (**Image 5**) Obvious cultural amenities are historical townscape and landscape, along with art galleries, museums, universities and other learning institutions, orchestras and fine dining. (**Image 6**) Not so tangible is living or ethnographic culture, especially rural life ways (characteristic values and behavioral traits). Santa Fe, New Mexico is a good example of all these.

It's difficult to assess and plan for much of these amenities, and AMs typically find it difficult to articulate this attraction, as much is integrated in perceptions of rural natural amenities. (**Image 7**) In the recent SSO AM study we used 2 survey research tools to get at this component: the KIS open-ended, personal interviews clearly identified that cultural amenities were very important for SSO AMs (and other residents), while the HHS comparatively did not indicate the high value of local culture.

2.3 *Permanence and Intermittency of Residence*

When is AM *permanent*? Not only 2nd homes owners bring to a community a sense of impermanence or variability (although they often become full time

residents), but the so-called full time resident AM are also not so permanent. Many move on for perceived better amenities, especially as present ones are degraded or living costs become unmanageable. The recent SSO AM study offers one example: 29.6% of AMs had amenity-migrated to another destination earlier and 5.7% said they were considering moving to another high amenity place. In addition, 11.4% of all other resident types were considering the same kind of move. Part of this issue is the changing meaning of *retirement*. The traditional AM retiree still exists, but there is also growing number and variety of a *semi-retirement* types. One view is a continuum from traditional retirement to fully economically active.

Also, there appears to be a significant attitude and value change occurring about residence and community, manifest as a larger geographic perception of one's *living realm*, a decrease in *place rootedness*, w/ virtual or non-spatial community replacing the older place-based community. At the same time for many there is considerable anxiety over searching for place-base community. This of course leads to discussion of AMs local belonging and participation (Moss 2006 Ch 1).

A related planning concern is the usefulness of our existing migration/ residence statistical regimes for analysis, projections and decision-making, for such basics as equitable/fair taxation, public services access and fees, etc.

2.4 Land Conversion & Density of Development

Amenity-led population growth has been considerable and rapid, especially from a rural community's perspective and its planning and management capacity (**Image 8**). US census data indicates there was considerable increase in in-migration to high amenity places, typically from metropolitan areas from the 1970s, and especially in the 1990s. The mountainous West, an area ranking high in the US Dept of Agriculture county amenity index, has been a particular recipient (McGranahan 1999). Attracted by the Rocky Mountains and their parks & protected areas, the population of Teton County, WY grew more than 60% in the 1990s. Gallatin County, MT grew 34% between 1990 and 2000, and is now the 32nd fastest growing county in the USA. Nearby Park County grew 11% the same decade, while further up the Rocky Mountain chain Flathead County grew 26% during the 1990s.

Principal towns within these high amenity counties exhibit similar high growth. For example Bozeman and Kalispell, Montana grew 21% and 19% respectively between 1990 and 2000. Further north Canmore, Alberta increased its population some 76% between 1991 and 2001, while the more remote town of Smithers In northwest BC grew 12.5% in the same decade.

AM is responsible for considerable land conversion of open space and agricultural lands, especially in valleys and mountain foothills. In Colorado, annually between 1987 and 1997 57,100 ha of agricultural land was converted for residential and commercial development. In Park County, Wyoming the

average rural lot size in 1970 was 0.97 ha, and by 1999 exceeded 4.8 ha. Nearby in Teton County the dominant development pattern was one house per 1.21 ha in 1990, but is now about one house per 14.16 ha. Similarly houses are large; the 1999 median size was 270 sq m. Further north Gallatin County, Montana in 1980 experienced the conversion of about 13,800 ha to residential development and in 2000 this increased to about 28,000 ha. Between 1997 and 2006 this county lost 55,850 ha of productive farmland to residential use.

This land change has been accompanied by high and rapid increase in real property prices, and associated social dislocations. *Image 9* gives examples of these price increases in western USA counties. *Image 10* shows median prices of main towns within these counties and *Image 11* some western Canadian averages for comparison.

This change has occurred typically at low densities, sprawling out over valley floors, up into foothills, and often onto ridgelines (*Image 12*). A useful typology of amenity-led human settlement is still needed. There seems to be 3 general physical patterns: 1) rural town peripheral growth into the landscape, w/ leap-frogging (common especially in unincorporated areas), 2) resorts (usually w/ dense cores), and 3) mixtures of 1) and 2) above.

3. Response to Amenity Migration: Reactive and Proactive

The following characteristics appear common in high amenity mountain regions today (*Image 13*).

Understanding the Amenity Migration Phenomenon

Generally there is little understanding or slow realization of the systemic causes and pattern of AM, especially the external driving forces and their relationship to local conditions.

Strategic Public Action

Generally very little of a strategic nature has occurred to response to AM western North America, and even less of a proactive nature. Nothing at national level outside of some government sponsored research, and seemingly at state and provincial level mainly the promotion of resort development for economic growth. At the more local level the economic growth focus is also common and pronounced, with AM promotion usually being undertaken by private land developers. A few local public entities, such as economic development and planning offices, have considered AM as an economic driver per se. They usually perceived it as traditional retirees, and to a lesser extent as a counter to shrinking social services budgets related to decreasing populations. But this latter has been characteristically only in the policy consideration phase.

3.3 Cultural Context and Content of Public Planning

The above condition has been compounded in mountain regions in particular by cultures of comparative poverty, scarcity, pride in individualism and independence, and often a marginal concern for these regions in the centres of political-economic power. And seemingly most apparent in the US *New West*, this has been accompanied by a general anti-planning ethic that resulted in change and growth management that ratifies rather than guides. This situation is made more complex by the difficulty local rural jurisdictions, especially unincorporated communities, have in controlling the effects of growth due to their inadequate regulatory power, finances, and often policy and planning skills.

In the US West in particular over the decades public planning has developed a split personality as much of what planners do is intended to facilitate, even encourage land development by enabling market forces and the goals of private developers by insuring required infrastructure and services. On the other hand, citizens look to public planning, for careful management, and more and more recently, sustainable land use.

Also, effective citizen collaboration is atypical, being rarely involved throughout the planning and management process, particularly in the implementation of plans through a monitoring and evaluation role. At the same time, elected officials are inadequately involved in the planning process. This often results in variances with the elected officials rejecting planning staff and board recommendations. A regional planning context and authority, essential for the eco-systemic framework needed to strategically manage amenity-led change, is also weak or lacking.

The result of the above general condition is weak general oversight and determination in implementation, with critical disparity between plans and their actual outcomes (Moss 2006, Travis 2007).

4. A Shift Appears to Be Occurring

Recently there is growing local citizens' articulation of disaffection with, and opposition to the degrading change that has been occurring. Also, more public planners understand the significance of ALM and appear to be looking for means to address it systemically. This shift appears focused on reversing the loss of open space, landscape aesthetic, farmland, wildlife habitat and biodiversity, along with unaffordable housing. One indication is the intention to use sustainable land use principles and practices that often have their roots in the *New Urbanism* and *Smart Growth* planning approaches of the past two decades, and are now being translated from their metropolitan origin to the urbanizing rural context. This is at times referred to as *New Regionalism* or *New Ruralism*, and is focused on densification of human settlement, including mixed land use, reduction of automobile use, increased energy, water and waste treatment efficiencies, and use of resource-conserving building design and materials. Socially there is an

attempt to have local services, such as schools and small shops, walkable within a neighborhood, along with integration of income strata. It is still early, and results vary.

In this shift there are examples of increased acceptance of change being the norm and of the future being highly uncertain. Perhaps much of this stems from a new realization of global climate change and its uncertain specifics. This awareness is reflected in some examples of a return to the use multiple future scenario strategic planning in the public sector for town and regional or biosphere reserve planning. Examples are the strategy for the Central Valley of California, and closer, sustainable development planning for the Similkameen Valley, BC and OCP planning for Rosland, BC. Hopefully, this time around this potentially powerful methodology will be used in the public sector with considerably better understanding and rigor than was characteristic in the 1950s and 1980s.

One example of the shift outlined here is the new Gallatin County Commissioner's growth management plan. It focuses on protecting farms and ranches, open space, water quality, wildlife habitat and property values. It emphasizes locating and densifying new growth in existing towns and adjacent suburbs. In subdivisions it will allow up to 4 houses per 64.75 ha, and for the same area on "rural land" the maximum density will be one house. Clustering of home sites on greenfield developments is to be encouraged and given design assistance (Sonoran Institute 2006). However one needs to ask how will such plans significantly affect the high cost of living, especially for shelter, social dislocation and segregation, or energy consumption?

More locally three municipal examples that include specific consideration of AM as a driving force in their current planning are Canmore, Alberta, Golden, BC and Rosland, BC.

5. Likely Futures of AM

Looking out more than a decade or so the future of AM is uncertain, especially for its 2nd home component, and particularly in the light of the cost of energy and global climate change (Moss 2006, pp 317-318).

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