

Amenity Migration

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Abstract: Amenity migration often brings population growth and development to the rural areas of the United States richest in scenic and recreational resources. The “turnaround” migration of Americans from urban to rural amenity areas increased dramatically in the 1970’s, declined in the 1980’s and surged again in the 1990’s. This paper focuses on the theoretical perspectives, social context, and implications associated with amenity migration.

Introduction

Amenity migration is currently one of the major forces of change in rural America. Beginning in the 1970’s, many rural areas in the United States registered net increases in the number of people settling there, ending decades of population decline in many rural counties, and more generally, reversing a 150-year trend in the United States toward urbanization (Johnson & Beale, 1998). Urban to rural migration bypassed some rural counties, and the high rates of rural in-migration seen throughout the 1970’s declined sharply in the 1980’s. But rural population growth, due primarily to in-migration, has increased again in the 1990’s across the majority (71%) of rural counties in the U.S. (Johnson, 2000). The context for this rural renaissance includes changing industry patterns, new and expanded communication technologies, changing retirement practices, and the economic prosperity that gives people the power to choose where to live. But the most compelling single explanation for the rural renaissance, and the one that accounts for the name “amenity” migration, is that an increasing number of people want to live in areas rich in natural resource amenities and are willing to sacrifice the higher wages and better job opportunities characteristic of metropolitan areas to live in places where they believe their quality of life will be better.

The co-occurrence of high rates of in-migration with scenic, recreational, and climatic amenities in rural counties in the U.S. has been confirmed in two recent studies (Beale & Johnson, 1998; McGranahan, 1999). Using slightly different definitions of what constitutes “amenities,” each found that the rates of net in-migration to non-metropolitan counties in the U.S. were significantly related to natural resource amenities. McGranahan (1999) created an amenity index that included climate, topography, and water, and found that a county’s rank on this index predicted its rate of in-migration. Beale and Johnson (1998) classified 285 (or 12%) of rural counties as recreational counties, based on measures of economic activity in tourism and recreation sectors. These counties had much greater gains from net in-migration than did the balance of non-metropolitan counties in the U.S.

The population growth associated with amenity migration can result in changes in an area’s social, biological, and physical systems. Positive changes can include economic diversification and prosperity, increasing property values, and lower rates of out-migration as newly created job opportunities keep those entering the workforce in their hometown. But there can be negative consequences as well. The construction of homes for new residents may push the boundary between residential and undeveloped land further out, increasing the extent of the urban-wildland interface, as well as the total amount of land taken up with human settlement. Loss of forest cover associated with new construction results in the loss of habitat for plants and animals, and further environmental damage can occur if there is a time lag between the new construction and the capacity to accommodate it with appropriate infrastructure. Furthermore, an influx of new residents sometimes creates problems for managing wildlands, especially where residential areas are intermixed with farms, ranches, or forests (Egan & Luloff, 2000). Whether there are value differences between new and long-term residents or not is debatable (Sofranko, 1980; Nelson, 1997), but clearly, rapid community change combined with pressure on resources can create or escalate conflicts over resource management.

As with any trend that captures thousands of individual decisions, amenity migration is not the result of a single or simple cause, nor is there general agreement about which theory best fits the trend. Many different theoretical perspectives have been offered from social science disciplines such as rural sociology, demography, and regional economics. They differ regarding the social forces and historic and current events to which migration patterns should be attributed. Some theories seek to explain individual decisions, some interpret metropolitan versus non-metropolitan growth and decline, and others focus on regional shifts in migration. In addition, the distinct and abrupt change in domestic migration patterns that occurred in the 1970’s is given more or less significance across the theories. The major formal theories of migration are briefly reviewed here, followed by a look at some related

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trends surrounding this phenomenon. Finally, the implications of amenity migration, for social systems and for natural resources, will be discussed.

Theoretical Perspectives on Recent Domestic Migration Patterns in the United States

Late in the 1970's as the uniqueness of that decade's migration patterns became apparent, debate began over what forces might have caused such a radical shift and whether the trends in the succeeding decades would resemble the 1970's or return to historic patterns of rural-to-urban migration dominating domestic migration (Dillman, 1979; Johnson & Fuguitt, 2000). Until the pattern of the 1970's was revealed, there were few demographic models that ventured far from the economic paradigm. Models built around wage levels, corporate decision making, and national-level policies had always been the basis for predicting and explaining major domestic population shifts. But the turnaround was different. Not only did huge numbers of people move out of cities, they moved to places with no real economic engine, at least in the traditional sense. Rural counties whose economies were built on agriculture or extractive industries or small manufacturing plants were not necessarily the recipients of the 1970's migrants. Instead, turnaround migration was characterized as "amenity" migration, since it was the counties with natural resources, good climates, and scenic vistas that drew new residents.

Explaining growth in small communities with no real economic pull issued a direct challenge to traditional ways of thinking about migration. While many migration models implicitly treated migration as the end result of individual decision processes (i.e., where the individual chooses to live in the area with the highest wages and best jobs), the notion that anything as nebulous as quality of life could enter into consideration and even dominate economic factors did not fit with conventional thinking. The migration patterns of the 1970's opened the door to a new way of thinking about migration, one in which natural resources played an important role. In addition, the turnaround highlighted the increasing diversity of forces at work in migration. Migration research went from the relatively simple, general models, applicable in any context and built around economic motives, to what is now a growing emphasis on the more group- and place-specific explanations necessary to understand contemporary American domestic migration patterns.

Relative Wages

Economic models that compare wage levels across geographic regions, between rural and urban areas, and even across different countries have long been the fundamental bases for understanding and predicting migration patterns. The freedom to move from one residence to another is so fundamental and long-standing that Americans often take it for granted. It is also essential to the free market system. If labor is to flow from jobs with lower wages to jobs that pay higher wages, individual workers must be free to move to where the pay is best. Seen from this perspective, migration is the end result of an individual choice where the relative wages and costs of living associated with two or more places are weighed and analyzed, and the place associated with the highest net benefit is chosen. In a situation where the household's earning potential is derived from one job, the location of the one job is fixed, and the alternative to that job is another job in a different fixed location, wages are clearly the most powerful predictors of migration decisions, all else being equal.

However, the model of one worker per household deriving income from one fixed-location job no longer describes the situation facing many households. In 1999, the majority (64%) of married-couple families had both parents employed (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2000). Unearned income, the profits associated with returns to capital, rental income, and various entitlement programs (including pension and retirement benefits), is also important to many households, and seldom imposes constraints on where the earner lives (Nelson, 1999). An increasing number of jobs are not location-specific, because they involve either extensive travel or telecommuting. Opportunities to work from remote locations or from a home office are available for a growing number of workers (Dannhauser, 1999). Hence being tethered to a place by a job is a less common situation than it once was. Locating a household between two jobs presents a more complicated choice and different trade-offs than the conventional wage-based models of migration can capture.

Place Utility Models

Some economic models recognize that each location offers a different mix of amenities, which in turn determine the quality of life in that locale (Dillman, 1979; Hoehn, Berger, & Blomquist, 1987; Wingo, 1973). Within the context of a traditional wage-based migration model, locational amenities are included as a source of additional utility, expressed in monetary terms, and are weighed in the migration decision. Though this idea is formally known as place utility, there are also many colloquial terms for it, such as "half pay for a view of the bay." Place utility models predict that wage levels in high amenity areas can be lower because wages are effectively augmented by the benefits one receives from living in a nice environment. Accounting for amenities in this way

preserves the integrity of wage-based migration models; but the extent to which the value of amenities can be captured in utilitarian or monetary terms, and the degree to which the values of various amenities are shared across groups, is open to question.

Business Location Decisions

From a slightly larger-scale perspective, analyses of where businesses locate is sometimes used as a basis for understanding migration patterns. The reasoning goes that if job location determines residential location, then one must also understand why businesses (and hence, jobs) locate where they do. A host of factors shape business location decisions, including the location of their markets, transportation, communication, wage levels, and the availability of an appropriately trained or skilled workforce. Lines blur between individual and business location decisions when a company locates in a place workers will want to live, in an effort to compete for labor; or when company managers choose a business location based on where they want to live. In either case, surveys of business owners have shown that amenities can have a strong influence on the outcome of at least some business location decisions (Johnson & Rasker, 1995).

Regional Restructuring

Other efforts to understand domestic job location patterns incorporate national and global business patterns and trends, especially those concerning the costs of labor, relative competitive advantage, and the impacts of major trade policies such as NAFTA (Kasarda, 1995). Region-wide growth and decline can be analyzed in these terms. For example, the relative advantages of moving a manufacturing plant out of the Midwest's "Rust Belt" and into the rural South are traced to differences in wage rates, union strength, and the recent development of adequate infrastructure in the South (Frey & Speare, 1988). Regional restructuring models have been very influential in recent migration literature, and are posed as an alternative to individual preference-based explanations for migration patterns, settlement patterns, urbanization and changes in each over the course of the past several decades. The significance of this approach to understanding migration is that regional restructuring offers a tractable explanation for large-scale migration trends without taking amenities into consideration. Where these models fall short is that they cannot explain smaller scale variations in migration, such as county-level differences.

Individual Preference and Choice

Modeling the migration behavior of society as a whole is an approach to studying mobility that has proven useful in predicting large-scale trends and changes, but does not provide insight into the actual individual-level decisions to relocate (Zuiches, 1980). Surveys, focus groups, and experimental approaches can complement larger-scale modeling and reveal more about specific issues such as the relative importance of wages versus amenities, which amenities in particular are influential, and how groups of migrants might differ in decision making (Lieber, 1979). For example, general population survey research investigating the preferences that underlie residence choice has shown that the desire to live in a smaller city or town is a preference shared by most Americans and one which has remained constant over a number of years (Brown, Fuguitt, Heaton & Waseem, 1997). Research into individual preference and choice can be expected to increase if employment plays a less dominant role in future migration decisions. Even among the poor, whose willingness to trade away higher wages might seem unlikely, a recent survey in Pennsylvania found that housing and neighborhood quality dominated both employment and family-related reasons given by poor urban residents for moving to non-metro areas (Schachter, Jensen, & Cornwell, 1998). Without a simple, universal explanation for mobility (i.e., jobs), demographers will need to develop a better understanding of a wider variety of preferences, judgments, and decision-making styles. Investigating migration decisions at the individual level provides a means to refine and advance understanding of these factors.

The Context for Amenity Migration

Amenity migration occurs in the context of many other social trends. Understanding the context that facilitates amenity migration is essential to anticipating its future potential. Each individual's decision to migration is influenced by many factors and experiences, and made possible by a particular set of circumstances. From changes in the institutions of retirement, to technological changes and recreation and tourism experiences, many aspects of the way we live in America in the 21st Century make amenity migration possible and desirable for a growing number of people.

Retirement Migration

The scholars who track retirement practices, and especially retirement migration, were some of the earliest to identify a separate stream of migrants who appeared to be choosing places to live based on amenity resources (see Wiseman, 1979). An increasing number of people now complete their working years well before major health problems limit their lifestyles, and the lifespan continues to increase while retirement age stays at 65. Portable pensions, both through government entitlement programs like Social Security and Medicaid and through private or corporate plans, give people the financial means to live independently. Newer programs that permit tax-deferred savings for retirement add further to the independence of retirees. Such programs have largely replaced family and local social networks as the primary source of support when the working years end. In short, the whole meaning of retirement has changed dramatically over the past half century (Thrush, 1999).

Perhaps the most significant difference new financial tools have made to retirees is that they now have the ability to relocate whether or not their family moves. With an income of their own, they have much greater ability to choose where to live than did retirees in earlier generations, whose children or other relatives were their primary support system. In a recent National poll of Baby Boomers conducted for AARP, 31% of those interviewed said they intended to relocate after retirement (AARP, 1998). Many retiring migrants, however, still wish to be near family and friends, particularly when deciding where to settle. As a result, retirement communities, whether planned or “naturally occurring,” may attract whole networks of people who were interconnected as family or friends before retirement.

Technological Changes

People who migrate without giving up or necessarily changing jobs often rely on technology to facilitate working from a distance. Telephone, cellular phone, facsimile, and computer technologies allow for communication across almost any distance within the U.S., given the right infrastructure and equipment. New technologies change the friction of distance and the relative remoteness of places (Johnson & Fuguitt, 2000), which in turn changes the routine travel costs associated with different locations. However, the actual effect of technological developments on business and household location decisions is still hotly debated (Dannhauser, 1999). The debate centers around how much difference technological developments have made and will make in changing the place-specific nature of jobs. There continues to be a gulf between the possible and actual use of new technologies, as end users learn that new devices (e.g., cell phones) only work in areas where the necessary infrastructure exists (e.g., transmitting towers). Work-at-home arrangements and home-based self-employment are expected to increase, but the number of people actually working from home on a regular basis was only about 3.4 million in 1997² (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 1998).

There is also reason to question whether advances in local access to technology lead or follow amenity migration. The need to demonstrate demand for a new service before the local provider will make an investment in the necessary infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, may limit the actual feasibility of distance commuting and telework until enough potential users have been identified (McMahon & Salant, 1999; Newman, 2000). There are also an increasing number of cautionary case studies about the unexpected obstacles to telecommuting and the ways in which the work-at-home experience is less productive and less enjoyable than expected (Allen & Moorman, 1997). This may be a matter of degree, though; most futurists and social scientists agree that technology is changing our patterns of work and commuting (Nie, 1999; Ruhling, 2000).

Tourism, Second Homes and Migration

Mobility statistics counting only household moves from one primary residence to another miss a whole realm of residence experiences related to tourism and recreation. Travel brings people into contact with a wide variety of new places over the course of a lifetime. While we typically envision people staying in commercial lodging when they travel, many people actually stay with friends or family, which provides a more direct experience with community life. If the host friends or family stay in the same place over some years, a visitor has the opportunity to get well acquainted with a place and community beyond that in which s/he lives. Even repeat visits to an area using commercial lodging build familiarity with a community and serve as a way of trying out a place to live.

Second home ownership and use falls somewhere between visiting as a tourist and moving in as a migrant (Stewart & Stynes, 1994). Investing in a second home is an expensive commitment, involving considerable costs to

² Estimates of the number of at-home workers vary widely depending on the definition used. The Census Bureau describes their methods as conservative.

maintain the home and pay taxes on the property. Consequently, second homes can be expected to strongly influence a family's vacation plans, becoming the destination of choice for most vacations through the year. The level of contact and familiarity with the host community is thus likely to be greater than tourists without second homes would have, but less than what residents would have. Similarly, the level of commitment to a community and investment in its future falls between what residents and tourists have, sharing some characteristics of each (Green, Marcouiller, Deller, Erkkila, & Sumathi, 1996).

The idea that the second home ownership is an intermediate step between tourism and migration was evident from interviews with people considering the purchase of a second home. I found that many were planning to buy a home in an area where they had grown up, an area they had visited repeatedly as a tourist, or an area where they had visited friends and family during vacations (Stewart, 1994). Many planned to purchase their second home with the idea already in mind that it would be their retirement home. Planning for a second home and for retirement were not separate processes, rather they were all part of the same long-range residential plan. As further evidence, a recent report from the American Resort Developers Association puts the rate of second home ownership for the population as a whole at 8.6%, but among those aged 55 and over, it is 15% (Fetto, 2000). In a series of studies focusing on amenity migrants in Arizona, McHugh and his colleagues heard many similar themes, with people discussing both their residential histories and their planned futures in terms of multiple "homes" (McHugh, Hogan & Happel, 1995; McHugh & Mings, 1996). In all of these studies, the idea that each person has, is attached to, and belongs in only one place at a time is not consistent with how people talk about their life experiences.

The migration process can be conceptualized as one that progresses through stages representing increasing levels of familiarity with and commitment to a chosen place (Figure 1). Multiple residences and multiple attachments literally widen one's horizons. Through the years, one can gradually shift the focus of one's life from place to place, using vacations and second homes as trial residences, building a sense of community and familiarity before migrating.

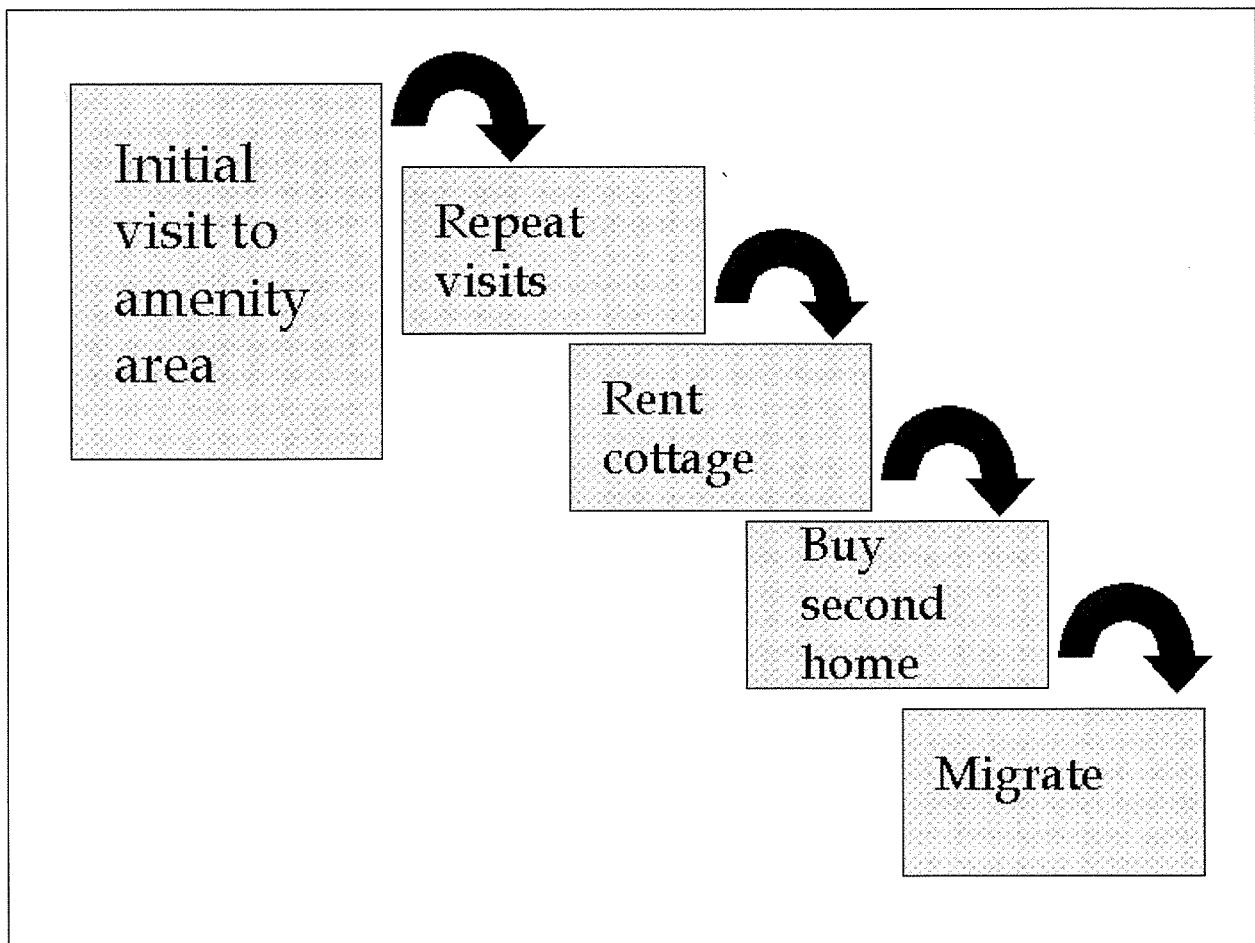


Figure 1. Stages representing increasing levels of familiarity with and commitment to a chosen place.

Consequences of Amenity Migration

Understanding a trend is not, by itself, a compelling reason to study it. It is the consequences and implications of the trend that make it worthy of attention. Amenity migration impacts rural areas because it represents a major, fundamental change in settlement patterns and trends. Place of residence is closely tied to personal identity. Migration disrupts and re-forms the social capital of both sending and receiving communities. Housing is the biggest single investment many American households make. And economic activity shifts from one region to another as money flows from the place it is earned to the places it is spent. For all these reasons, amenity migration affects an even broader cross-section of people and places than the migrants and the communities they move to. Much of what follows regarding the impacts of amenity migration is inferred based on what we know about migration and other sources of community change more generally. Research needed to sharpen our understanding of these effects is outlined in the final section of the paper.

Rural Community Change

One of the amenities migrants often seek is life in a rural community. The idealized vision of life in rural America is perhaps the only thing about small towns that has not changed over time (Ziebarth, 2000). Major changes in agriculture, most notably the reduction in the size of the farm work force, ran their course in the 1950's and 1960's (Johnson, 1999). Rural areas now tend to be good locations for the same kinds of industries that are competitive in the world economy (Kasarda, 1995). This has been especially true in the South where wages and land prices are relatively low. As a result, many of today's small towns are not central places where agricultural products are collected and shipped, but rather locations for industries, agribusinesses, and their workforce. The needs and characteristics of communities that arise in these economic circumstances often violate the expectations amenity migrants have for rural communities, leading to conflict over change and future development. Job migrants and amenity migrants may have very divergent expectations and needs, as well as different socioeconomic circumstances.

Migration Turbulence

Amenity migration is typically described in terms of net flows of people into or out of the area. The reason is simple; with no regular, direct tracking of mobility, net migration is instead best measured by determining what portion of the difference between successive population counts cannot be attributed to births and deaths. However, special analyses of migrant flow data provided by the IRS reveal some interesting features of the more widely available net migration flows. For example, Cromartie (1999) showed that in 1993-94, while the non-metropolitan counties of the West registered a net population gain of 1.4% through migration, it also experienced very high rates of both in (8.9%) and out (7.5%) migration. The rate of *outmigration* in the West exceeded the rate of *inmigration* for every other region in the country.

Some of the negative social features characteristic of fast-growing communities might be amplified by such rapid turnover, or turbulence. In particular, research has shown that people do not immediately register to vote or engage in community decision making (Rank & Voss, 1982). It seems to take some time after a move before people are able to fit their civic life back together. To the extent this is true, it is possible that the effects of migration on community discord or engagement are as much a result of turbulence, (i.e., many people being new to the community and people not staying very long in the community), as they are to the changing mix of values and attitudes represented among residents. This would explain both the persistence of anecdotal evidence regarding community problems in high-growth areas, together with the failure to find empirical support for the value differences presumed to cause such conflicts (Green et al., 1996; Nelson, 1997; Sofranko, 1980; Egan & Luloff, 2000).

Mailbox Economies

The term "mailbox economy" refers to transfer payments and unearned incomes, typically received in the mail, as a major source of economic activity in a community. The economic impacts associated with amenity migrants vary widely depending on the circumstances under which they make the move. Those who are fully pensioned retirees bring an entitlement check from outside the area and spend some portion of it in the rural community, a practice that supports regional economic growth. Similarly, those whose support comes from unearned income bring new money into the regional economy. New money brought into the regional economy supports new economic activity, a process discussed extensively in the tourism literature. The creation of ripple effects felt throughout the system is the same whether the tourist brings a paycheck and buys souvenirs, or the retiree brings a pension check and pays to have her driveway plowed. Each represents a new injection of money

into the community. The mailbox economy is generally seen as a positive consequence of migration, especially when the jobs created help stem the outflow of young residents looking for jobs.

Resource Impacts

Amenity migration draws attention from the resource management professions for two related reasons. First, it is the forests, water, and related resources that attract amenity migrants, making resource managers important players in any efforts to encourage immigration. Second, when population growth results from immigration, those same resources that drew migrants are put under increasing pressure as settings for new homes and for recreational use by a growing number of people. As the wildland-urban interface expands, more people live in the intermix zone between wild and settled areas, the impacts associated with pets interacting with wildlife accelerate, and the contiguity of forest cover is broken. In forested areas, the resource impacts that result from residential development are often lumped together and described as “forest fragmentation”, though undoubtedly, this is a less precise and more all-encompassing use of the term than landscape ecologists would make. The ecological significance of fragmenting forestlands is still a new area of study but initial findings suggest that more harm results affecting a broader mix of resources and systems than one would think.

In the Midwestern U.S. and in coastal areas, water is one of the major attractions for amenity migrants, for its recreational and scenic value (McGranahan, 1999; Fetto, 2000). The highest value real estate is on the waterfront, and views of or access to the water also demand a premium. As a result, in areas where residential construction began before widespread restrictions on shoreline and riparian-zone use were instituted, shorelines were the earliest and are usually the most densely settled areas (Radeloff et al., in press). The ways in which human activity in general, and development in particular, impact riparian resources are many, and a full discussion of them is beyond the scope of this paper. But the obvious increases in riparian impacts that result from development have been one of the major causes for concern over amenity migration (Bartlett, Mageean & O’Connor, 2000). These environmental impacts have also served as a tool for opponents of growth to effect meaningful restrictions on the location, rate, and character of development.

Community Involvement in Resource Management

In addition to the problems of coordinating planning, growth, and development, amenity migration also raises new issues of how forests and associated resources are managed. Increasingly, resource managers trained in rural resource management techniques find themselves working in close proximity to residential areas. Practices once considered standard and acceptable may be called into question by neighbors who watch management activities and their outcomes on a daily basis from their home. The extent of differences between groups – long time residents and new migrants, people with urban versus rural backgrounds, people from different generations – has been the subject of much debate in the literature and is far from resolved. But most agree that growth and change, particularly in small communities, brings new urgency to old issues and raises new issues as well.

Infrastructure Needs

Amenity migration often occurs in rural areas where the impacts of increasing population are amplified by limited infrastructures. The need to serve more people and to quickly expand the existing infrastructure can overwhelm both physical and civic resources of small communities. Yet failure to upgrade the infrastructure can cause potentially serious harm to the natural environment. Many seasonal homeowners eventually make their second home their primary residence. The second homeowner whose expectations regarding the level of service were formed during the tourist season may be dismayed to realize that municipal services are provided only on a seasonal basis.

Some infrastructure is provided privately, either by an association or by each individual property owner. In areas where homes rely on individual septic systems, septic systems designed for a particular volume of sewage are not necessarily upgraded when the patterns of use change, nor are there easy means of monitoring or regulating such changes. The tendency to leave existing systems in place long after they become obsolete, to add appliances (e.g., dishwasher, washing machine) to the house, or simply to use the system for more months in the year can contribute to problems. Even in those states where laws and regulations for septic systems are strict, enforcement may be difficult and may come long after a problem arises. Additionally, efforts to refine sewage treatment standards can have the unanticipated consequence of facilitating low-density rural growth in relatively sensitive areas, as happened in Wisconsin (LaGro, 1996). Areas without abundant supplies of fresh water face the constant challenge of keeping pace with growing domestic water demands. Road construction is expensive, political, and controversial because of the host of social and biophysical impacts that result from it; and the alternative of not expanding and upgrading

roads is no more feasible. In short, community growth and all the difficulties it entails often come to the civic forum through discussions over infrastructure.

Conclusions

People migrate for many reasons, motivated by a mix of work and non-work factors, and a changing set of possibilities and choices. Career downshifting and pre-retirement are options earlier generations would not or could not have entertained, and while they are not necessarily common choices today, the terms to describe them are in our vocabulary. At the other extreme there are those who spend their entire lives, whether waking or sleeping, working or vacationing, connected to their work responsibilities through new communication technologies. For many there is no longer any time or place truly away from work, nor any one place that constitutes being at work. Job location and wage-driven migration models lose their veracity in this context. Where once a few well-defined approaches to work life could characterize how most people went through life, we have diverged onto a growing number of different work life, home life, and lifespan combinations.

With jobs no longer linking people so tightly to places, amenity migration has great potential for continuing to reshape our settlement patterns, especially in resource-rich rural places. Tracking this trend and understanding its implications more clearly are priorities for research into human-environment interactions. Three broad areas of inquiry are suggested:

1. Continually updating analyses of migration patterns and trends, with an emphasis on potential growth and change in resource rich and environmentally sensitive areas;
2. Investigation of the impacts of rural residential development across physical, biological, and social systems at the landscape level; and
3. Understanding the extent, nature, causes, and remedies of community conflict, especially related to resource management.

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