

Ties without Strings

A Literature Review of Amenity Migration

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An Introduction:

Gaining popularity primarily in the 1990's, city dwellers under no economic restraints began massive transitions to locate in more scenic, rural areas. This migration is recognized as the driving force behind what has developed into what is today known as amenity migration. Recently classified as a post-tourism movement, (Borsdorf, et al. 12-22) amenity migration is defined by the fact that the individual's choice to relocate is not economically motivated, but rather based on socio-cultural and environmental draws. Recently amenity migration has also been referred to as in-migration, counter urbanization, and rural rebound (Chipeniuk 222-238). This is in sharp contrast to so called economic migrants - those choosing to relocate for financial reasons.

What is Amenity Migration?

Generally speaking, little is understood about amenity migration and no clear explanations regarding the development patterns or causes of this emerging phenomenon clearly exist. Even less is known about the driving forces behind amenity migration and their relation to local or regional conditions.

Although sharing many qualities and characteristics with tourism, amenity migration is proving to be a great societal force that must be studied if planners and policy makers are to understand the full effects it is having on society and land use planning.

Many rural destinations have no reaction to the concept of amenity migration since the phenomenon is so recent and poorly understood that no real approach is shaping or influencing it has been developed. Further research by experts and academics is needed as little awareness of amenity migration and its affects currently exist, however tourism is believed to play a major causative role (Chipeniuk 327-335). In response, some regions and public planners are coming to the realization that amenity migration is a growing societal force that must be dealt with in order to address sustainable planning. However, although these individuals often want to address the issues of amenity migration lead change, they frequently do not possess the proper planning tools to systematically address the issues. Moreover, amenity migration continues to be a subject of theoretical debate as planners possess a lack of empirical evidence supporting its

existence, and many view it as merely an ambiguous phenomenon (Bartos, et al. 124-141).

Who is an Amenity Migrant?

In a recent 2009 conference regarding the understanding and management of amenity migration in rural mountainous regions, the classification of what constituted an “amenity migrant” became a topic of much debate. Held in Banff, Alberta, 85 “expert” participants ranging from academics to policy administrators and planners present their ideas. The three key goals of this study were to (1) identify what drives amenity migration, (2) evaluate the effects and risks of amenity migration and (3) determine how amenity migration can be best measured and managed (The Banff Center). In this conference, 89% of the 85 respondents agreed that in-migration of new permanent residents constitutes amenity migration. Furthermore, 82% believe amenity migration is also composed of second home owners or renters (Chipeniuk).

Opposing, the often seasonal influx of visitors, transient tourists and economic migrants were deemed

associated to amenity migrants by not applicable components of true amenity migration. Interestingly, 63% also identified that it was not appropriate to distinguish between amenity migrants and local residents as citizens of a community. This may cause issues when studying this phenomenon as simply clumping new migrants to rural regions together and not separating amenity migrants from economic migrants overwrites the ability to plan appropriately for the two separate and distinct groups. Furthermore, as noted, later tension can commonly arise between amenity migrants and locals.

When asked to judge in their opinion if amenity migrants effect on a community was good, bad or too complex to judge, 20% voted good vs. 6.7% bad and 73% said the issue was too complex to judge (Chipeniuk). The experts also noted that three key data sets are needed for planners to effectively monitor amenity migration; these include the number of in-migrants, their origins and reasons for coming (Chipeniuk 327-335).

Facilitators of Amenity Migration:

Laurence Moss, an academic studying local and regional planning

change proposes there are two key “meta-motivators” of amenity migration; one the higher societal value the individual places on the natural environment and two, the differentiated or unique culture offered by these spaces. Nested within these mega-motivators, Moss proposes, are smaller motives including access to leisure, removal from unwanted or undesirable urban conditions, economic opportunities, and self indulgence.

The process of amenity migration may also be viewed as a push/pull theory, as Michael Bartos proposes. The crime, noise, traffic, pollution, congestion and failing natural environments of many urban centers may all be seen as factors leading to an anti-urban push, whereby individuals are fleeing their urban-civilian lifestyles for a slower change of pace. Often these individuals develop the viewpoint that cities are impersonal, artificial and seek the personal attachment often provided by rural areas. Likewise, the pull factors of a pro-rural movement include improved environmental quality, a more tranquil lifestyle and a move towards more “local” places with a defined sense of small community (Bartos, et al. 124-141).

Bartos also notes the complications of studying amenity migration due to its many interrelated factors. These can be classified into 3 main categories; (1) household characteristics, (2) economic and state policy and (3) landscape potential (Bartos, et al. 124-141). Meanwhile, another researcher, Stolte, countered that the draw of natural and cultural amenities, a more leisurely pace, refuge from global uncertainties, metropolitan living conditions and opportunities for personal and spiritual development all foster the relocation of amenity migrants (Stolte). Many different sources noted the following overlapping components that were similar in most cases of amenity migration; there was no fixed location, amenity migrants had abundant discretionary wealth, the region had abundant, affordable land, and lastly amenity migrants had discretionary time.

a) No fixed location

A key facilitator of amenity migration is mankind’s modern mobility. With the invention of information technologies (IT), tools became available to society facilitating movement with relative ease, meaning individuals were

no longer tied to one geographic region. This included forms of communicative technology such as Skype, email, cell phones and the internet. Through the creation of mass information technologies, the geographical barriers and constraints of amenity migration were lifted.

The freedom and independence provided through the automobile also serves to promote amenity migration, as a relatively affordable means of transportation is readily available. However, with the rising cost of petroleum based fuels and the lingering threat of Peak Oil, this once affordable means of independence and transportation may severely limit the mobility of amenity migrants.

Another fostering aspect of amenity migration is the idea that individuals today are often psychologically less rooted in one specific place. Ergo, a personal attachment to multiple places is more common (e.g. a week home and weekend cottage) facilitated by the availability of cheap and accessible forms of transportation and sufficient economic wealth. This theory can be mirrored by the notion that non-spatial, interpersonal communities are

theoretically replacing placed-based communities, a debate that causes much anxiety for those who feel the need to be part of a placed-based community. Indirectly, this can at times lead to issues with local place-based community and the role of the amenity migrant's participation within this community. As such, a "them" versus "us" ideology commonly ensues as issues of who belongs and who does not commonly develop within the local community.

b) Abundant discretionary wealth

Mailbox incomes and individually accumulated wealth have both promoted the concept of amenity migration. As such, amenity migrants often bring with them substantial savings which can contribute to the economic vigor and social networks of rural communities. Thus, supporters of amenity migration argue that amenity migrants are for the most part, economically strong, in that they are from the upper to middle class of society. Therefore, they bring with them external funding as a source of revenue into the community (Bartos, et al. 124-141). Furthermore, for those not independently wealthy, there is often a willingness to accept lower incomes in order to move to

areas that offer higher quality natural, social or cultural environments.

c) Abundant, affordable land

Amenity migration is also commonly fuelled by relatively abundant land availability and cheap acquisition costs. These, often more affordable real estate prices of rural areas are seen as a favourable pull factor, in that from a logic standpoint it is often cost prohibitive to live within most urban centers (Borsdorf, et al. 12-22).

d) Discretionary time

An abundance of available discretionary time and destination comforts are also a driving factors of amenity migration. As such, the two key age groups that compose the majority of amenity migrants, are elders looking for destinations for retirement, and the younger, independently wealthy who have no fixed ties to a workplace or are often looking for second homes (Moss). This brings to light a further significant factor in amenity migration, as the changing meaning of “retirement” dictates that many individuals choose to keep working well into their mid to late sixties. Semi-retired types are also more common

now, leading to the changing ideal of a retirement continuum in modern society. Ergo, both these demographics possess abundant “free” time as they are retired, semi-retired or are able to work from home.

The Amenity Migration Environment:

Regions targeted by amenity migrants are usually characterized by a perceived high environmental quality, existing tourism infrastructure, and strong sense of traditional, local culture. Typically, mountainous and coastal regions are among the most popular (Borsdorf, et al. 12-22). Moreover, amenity migrants are rarely attracted to an area based on what town offers on its own, but desire the features of the region or greater municipality at large, making collaborative planning a key consideration for amenity migrant planners (Chipeniuk 327-335).

i) Cultural Environment

Amenity migrants desire culturally rich destinations such as historic townscapes and landscapes, along with art galleries, museums, operas and fine dining. Within these spaces, amenity migrants are drawn to the less tangible

aspects of “place” such as the ethnographic culture or its rural way of life. As such, planners find it difficult to both assess and plan for amenity migration, as amenity migrants are often uncertain exactly what they are drawn to within a region or their reasons for this attraction. Drawn to the perceived better cultural amenities, historical and cultural rich centres of rural small towns act as a “genius loci” luring individuals in with a sense of mystique. In this way, much of the driving force behind amenity migration remains a psychological assessment (Moss).

ii) Natural Environment

Amenity migrants often target the rural areas most “lagging” in development, assuming a better comparative advantage of better preserved environment and unaltered landscapes (Bartos, et al. 124-141).

A Source of Conflict:

Amenity migration presents several key issues in highlighting societal and spatial changes in the context of urban planning and rural development. Change as a result of amenity migration can be viewed as both a benefit to some,

and as a threat to others. While there is both good and bad aspects to amenity migration, consensus seems to be that the environment and social relationships sphere are often the two impacts hardest hit by uncontrolled amenity migration (Chipeniuk 222-238).

i) Environmental Based Conflicts

From a land use planning perspective, amenity migration is responsible for considerable land use changes on the local landscape as previously agricultural lands are converted to residential development. This trend has been especially predominant in mountainous regions, valleys and foothills, primarily due to their scenic vistas. Likewise, these changes impact real estate markets as land prices often experience dramatic and uncontrollable shifts as areas become increasingly inhabited. As a result, where relatively affordable land was available, prices become so inflated that it is often no longer economically viable for local residents or lower income amenity migrants to inhabit these regions. The U.S. state of Colorado is an example of this. In the decade between 1987 and 1997, 57,100 hectares annually of agricultural

land was converted to residential and commercial development (Moss).

Higher property prices as a result of this “rural” draw are not the only development effect amenity migration has upon the landscape. Typically rural residential development has been that of low-densities, sprawling out over valley floors and up foothill ridgelines, in sharp contrast to the dense urbanization of cities. While this is still the case with amenity migrants, the disposable income of many amenity migrants leads to the construction of larger homes on larger lots, further compounding the issue of residential sprawl. Evidence of this is in Park County, Wyoming, where the average size of a residential rural lot increased from 0.97 hectares in 1970 to just over 4.8 hectares in 1999 (Stolte).

As developers build in natural areas to provide more housing for amenity migrants, the natural environment also becomes more fragmented through the effects of subdivision creation, fencing, access roads, clearances for utilities and infrastructure. This loss of wildlife habitat and the recreational disturbance of large mammals via exploitation of hiking and game trails are all unintended

consequences of amenity migration (Chipeniuk 222-238).

While amenity migration may counteract population decline in rural areas, its benefits on de-populating communities also include the prevention of declining real estate values and tax increases as lower community populations lead to wasteful and unneeded infrastructure. Ironically, amenity migrants may also pose an additional burden on community infrastructure as explosive growth and natural resource consumption become “red flag” issues for planners. This is the case in some rural communities such as Jackson, Hull, Whistler, and Canmore; all of which have unintentionally witnessed some of these consequences in the way of soaring housing prices, high cost of living, massive out movements of local employees and a huge conversion of agricultural lands to residential (Chipeniuk 327-335). While policy related responses to these and other amenity migration created problems serve as a potential solution, implementation of such policies are often enacted after development occurs, lagging behind and becoming harder to implement in higher growth areas (Gill 9-12). This is evident in

the form of policies response to affordable housing issues in local resort locations such as Whistler, B.C.

ii) Societal Based Conflicts

Consciously or sub-consciously, amenity migrants alter the very places in which they live as an act of personal indulgence. Through this indulgence, they as individuals possess a compelling desire to become a part of the rural lifestyle – a strange fascination that is often their initial draw to become part of a different community (Bartos, et al. 124-141). As a result, amenity migration commonly introduces a social and political separation between local residents and amenity migrants. Furthermore, remains the questionable fact of are rural communities even conscious of changes that may be occurring because of amenity migration?

Communities are not likely to account for amenity migration within their planning measures if they are not even aware of amenity migrations existence (Chipeniuk 327-335). If amenity migration is to be adequately addressed by municipal planners and policy makers, it will require the recognition of the changing attitudes about land use and

community development (Chipeniuk 327-335).

Often values between local residents and amenity migrants clash, as community officials lack appropriate responses in dealing with sprawling growth and indirect social effects within the community. Commonly communities deal with issues such as increases to property assessments and taxes as a result of development for the sake of amenity migrants. Ergo, local resident's property taxes increase, without proportionate increases in the level of government services they receive. This skirmish between taxpayer's expectations and reality is often a further point of tension between locals and amenity migrants (Chipeniuk 327-335). Furthermore, social services such as policing and fire regimes must also change as more people place additional weight on services at a municipal level. Resource allocation such as freshwater use, traffic congestion, sewage disposal and water pollution also become pertinent (Bartos, et al. 124-141).

Activists of amenity migration commonly voice concerns over the environmental degradation that may be occurring as a result of ineffective

planning for amenity migration. This encompasses, for a large part, the “NIMBY” (Not in My Backyard) portion of the population, along with those unaccustomed to change (Moss).

While some experts argue that amenity migration may help to improve the environmental and cultural quality of sterile rural regions, others foresee the massive invasion of urban behaviour patterns into rural areas as a threat to the creation of cultural uniformity. The incoming urban culture often leads to a decline in rural traditions, changing what was the original draw for many amenity migrants (Borsdorf, et al. 12-22). As mentioned, a “them” versus “us” ideology then commonly ensues as issues of roles within the local community develop. This local tension is further compounded by the fact that amenity migrants are commonly perceived as tourists, stigmatizing amenity migrations strong social and philosophical ties to tourism.

This all sparks discussion regarding amenity migrants local belonging and participation within the community. While amenity migration can bring in new residents with different values who can affect communities that are not only theirs, there is an increasing

need to draft amenity migration guidelines in order to identify, address and hopefully rectify this and other related issues (The Banff Center).

Planning Responses:

Amenity migration shows that as more individuals choose to travel, it becomes increasingly difficult to track their movement, planning and projecting accordingly. This is an important consideration for planners and policy makers as accurate forecasting is necessary for successful planning, particularly in areas such as resource use and taxation. For instance, how does a resort community such as Whistler with a population of 150,000 in the winter but only 4,000 in the summer adequately address these issues? While the community statistics only record 4,000 registered residents, the town must accommodate a plan for 150,000 to provide adequate infrastructure and services base. Furthermore, in terms of fair taxation, should “ski-bums” residing locally for only 4 months of the year be charged the same as year-round residents? (Moss). Often this dilemma is tied to the communities lack of ability to distinguish and track amenity migrants,

as it is often difficult to obtain reliable resources to track amenity migrants influences on the community – postal codes, housing numbers, etcetera (Chipeniuk 327-335).

Amenity migration also creates a planning concern regarding the usefulness of statistical trends currently available for analysis, projection and decision making purposes. The common temporary or locality characteristic of many amenity migrants raises issues surrounding access to public services, servicing fees and equitable or fair taxation (Moss).

Development as a result of amenity migration tends to follow 3 key patterns. First is the “leap-frogging” approach by which peripheral growth is observed at the edges of rural settlements, incrementally extending outward into previously unoccupied areas. In sharp contrast, resort development acts as a destination approach to development, exemplified by dense core communities being sporadically situated throughout the pristine landscape. The third pattern is subsequently a mix of one and two.

Sustainable and effective planning for amenity migration displays many of

the same sustainable land use principles as new urbanism and smart growth. By applying these traditional urban planning principles to rural contexts, new catch phrases such as “New Regionalism” and “New Ruralism” are beginning to make their way into the literature of amenity migration planning (Moss).

Meanwhile, the primary economic motive of amenity lead development fails to address many of the societal spin off problems caused by amenity migrants such as resource scarcity, altered associations of community pride, defined individualism and independence. This is primarily due to the fact that a large majority of amenity migration development is a direct result of promotion through private developers. Often elected officials are not adequately involved in these planning processes, and as such many important considerations are either overlooked and/or rejected by planning staff. Administrators and policy makers may also not appreciate how a 1-2% increase in populace base through the influx of amenity migrants can quickly compound to point where amenity migrants compose the primary community center (Chipeniuk 327-335). This in turn results in weak or

generalized oversight when it comes to amenity migration related planning decisions, translating into lack of conformity between initial plans and their actual outcomes (Moss).

Most town planners are currently ill-prepared to deal with amenity migration as most were unaware of the size and force of amenity migration within their community (Chipeniuk 327-335). It was also noted that the concept of amenity migration is commonly discussed with citizens and planners on behalf of local governments, as opposed to elected officials and administrative staff. This is intriguing as the primary purpose of planners is often to facilitate and enable land development through promotion of market forces and goals of private developers, a process which is often best done through investments in private infrastructure and servicing. Amenity migration, unlike other form of policy development, often does not follow the conventional assumption that social development will follow in accord with economic development (Chipeniuk 222-238). Ergo, planners often counteract the loss of resource based jobs to that of amenity migration, similar to making to making tourism a foundation of the local

economy. Controversially, amenity migration seems to foster an anti-planning ethic – it is something that can't be predicted, can't necessarily be proactively fixed, so it will be accommodated or addressed after the fact (Moss). Comparatively little research has been done to test the usefulness and cost of tools to promote and manage amenity migration within rural regions (Chipeniuk 222-238).

Planning Scale and Amenity Migration:

The main limitation to amenity migration planning may be capacity based in a lack of government mobilization at both the regional and provincial scale. This further supports the idea of shared resources as many villages and towns are often too small to conduct effective amenity migration planning on their own (Chipeniuk 327-335). This ideal is supported by some amenity migration academics who argue that ultimately the provincial government should be facilitating and to some extent performing amenity migration planning. However, it seems that there is a lack of interest from provincial governments as the bulk of amenity migration only serves to re-arrange individuals within the province,

and ergo no need is seen by the province to participate in such actions (Chipeniuk 327-335). As a result, local government and town planners must be prepared to act proactively in order to get ahead of the curve, stomping out community fires before they arise (Stolte).

Some issues of amenity migration may be overcome through planning and policy restrictions such as maximum lot size and encouraging economies that supports local community interdependence. A further possible solution looks to local empowerment within a regional context, whereby towns think and act regionally, but without giving up their local autonomy (Stolte). It is suggested that using volunteers and community groups as opposed to additional staff may be an alternative regional approach to address amenity migration involving the pooling of resources between areas or regions (Chipeniuk 327-335). Despite amenity migration as a force for good, much of the modern planning theory is concerned with employing amenity migration on behalf of community development to promote development in its infancy (Chipeniuk 222-238). While some municipalities track amenity migrants

through tax assessments, the cost of doing so is impractical. An alternative method may be to track economic migrants manually through realtors and questionnaires (Chipeniuk 222-238).

Currently there exists a lack of ability to track amenity migration within rural regions – or perhaps a lack of tracking is indeed taking place. As such, little to no strategies currently exists to combat the issues that arise from this trend. Moreover, no coherent amenity migration planning strategy guide exists, as most information and research available is anecdotal or from varying and often conflicting sources (Chipeniuk 222-238).

Conclusions:

Amenity migration brings up several key planning issues:

1. Could hinterland communities suffering with population decline utilize amenity migration to replace economic out migrants?
2. Are communities aware of the problems amenity migration can cause? Are communities currently planning to attract or manage amenity migration?

3. Are communities planning for amenity migration in conjunction with other planning bodies?
4. Do municipalities see their communities as attractive to AM's?
5. Do rural areas and/or towns have adequate resources to efficiently and effectively plan for amenity migration?
6. Do planners and administrative staff have the imaginative capacity to plan for amenity migration? (Chipeniuk 327-335).

Each of these issues and more will require further research and ultimately, planning at some scale to pre-emptively shape amenity migration as opposed to patching the results of it; from over-extended utilities, to degradation of the natural environment, to increasing urban mentalities and tensions between amenity migrants and those who were there before. A general consensus among experts and academic is that further research is required if we as planners are to adequately plan for amenity migration (Bartos, et al. 124-141). While amenity migration has the ability to stimulate smaller rural economies and curb declining populations, it cannot continue

to go unmanaged with results as serious as it is currently presenting. If current trends continue, amenity migration could have profound effects in shaping the rural countryside of North America, while it is indiscernible what these changes may result in.

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