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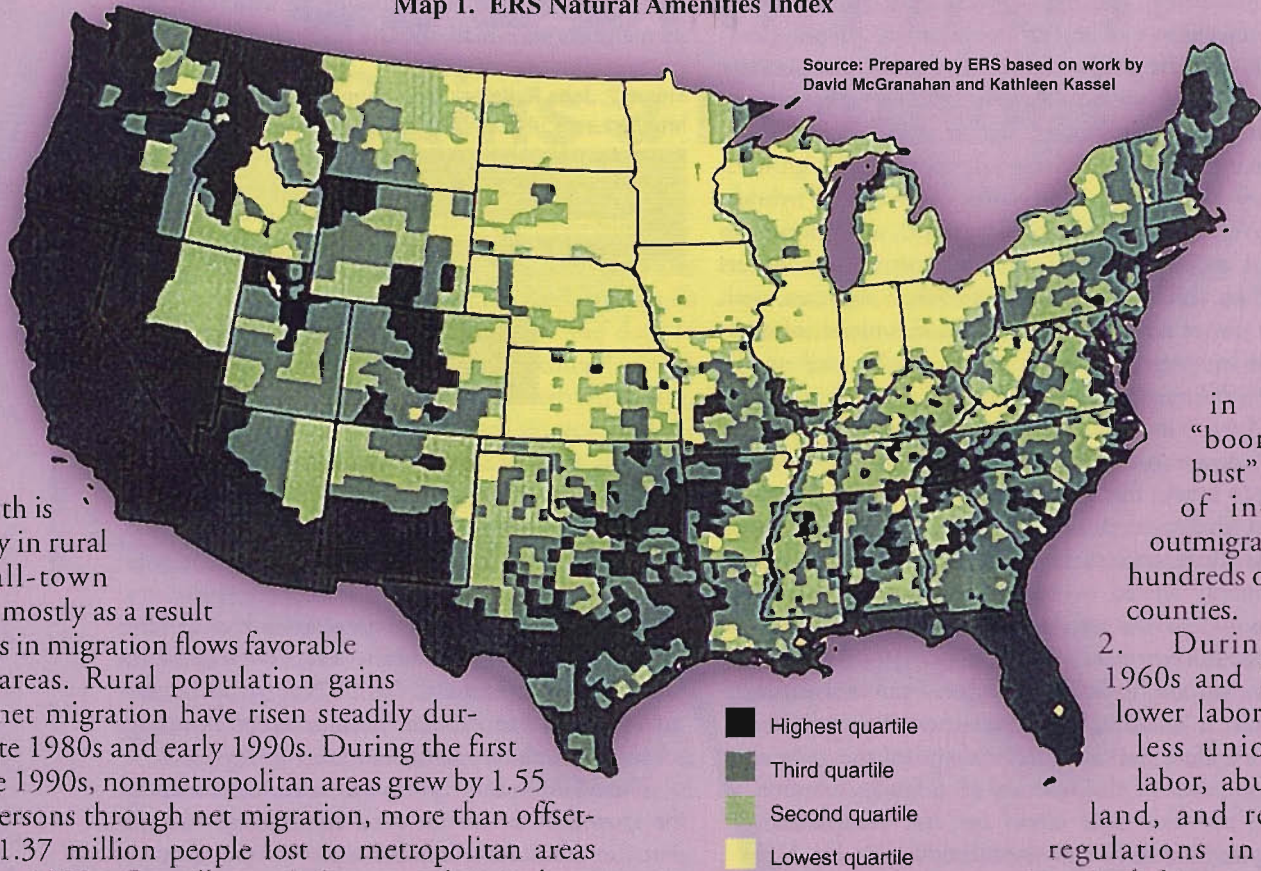
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# Migration: The increasing importance of rural

by Mark Nord and John B. Cromartie

Map 1. ERS Natural Amenities Index



Source: Prepared by ERS based on work by David McGranahan and Kathleen Kassel

Wide-spread population growth is under way in rural and small-town America, mostly as a result of changes in migration flows favorable to rural areas. Rural population gains through net migration have risen steadily during the late 1980s and early 1990s. During the first half of the 1990s, nonmetropolitan areas grew by 1.55 million persons through net migration, more than offsetting the 1.37 million people lost to metropolitan areas during the 1980s. Overall population growth rates have been similar in metro and nonmetro areas in recent years, but metro areas rely on higher natural increase and immigration from abroad to offset migration losses to nonmetro areas.

## Migration: three phases of rural comparative advantage

Although the rural rebound in population growth is widespread, it is, nevertheless, uneven, and the major factors affecting migration patterns across the rural landscape have changed substantially over the last few decades. Three broad and overlapping phases in determinants of rural economic growth and migration can be identified, as follows:

1. From the early years of the nation, rural economies were based on place-specific agricultural and mineral resources, and rural settlement patterns and migration patterns were determined largely by changes in those industries. The increasing productivity of agriculture and corresponding reductions in agricultural employment resulted in many decades of large rural-to-urban migration flows in the late nineteenth century and in much of the twentieth century. Meanwhile ebbs and flows in mining of coal, oil, and other minerals resulted

in huge “boom and bust” cycles of in- and outmigration in hundreds of rural counties.

2. During the 1960s and 1970s, lower labor costs, less unionized labor, abundant land, and relaxed regulations in rural America led to a manufactur-

ing growth spurt and played a major role in the “rural renaissance” of the 1970s. In many rural areas, however, this renaissance was short lived, and the role of manufacturing has declined somewhat in rural areas as the globalization of the economy has made rural America less competitive in low-wage, low-technology sectors.

3. More recently, residential and recreational amenities of rural locations have fueled rural growth. Migration depends on more than jobs. Residential preferences and the ability to act upon preferences, as well as employment opportunities, determine rural migration patterns. As incomes rise, recreation becomes increasingly important for a larger proportion of the population. This makes rural areas with recreational amenities attractive both as residential locations and as tourist destinations. Also, recent changes in production technology—toward smaller, more flexible manufacturing and toward a much larger services sector in the economy—reduce to some extent the competitive advantage of large cities and open the possibility of a more widely dispersed production system. This possibility is further enhanced by the communications revolution and by improvements in rural transportation and communication infrastructure.

These changes increase the extent to which plant location decisions are affected by rural residential and recreational amenities.

## Migration patterns: natural amenities and rurality matter

Migration patterns over the past decade help confirm the importance of natural amenities and of rurality itself in the population redistribution across the rural-urban continuum. The Economic Research Service of the USDA has developed a summary index of each county's natural amenities that includes measures of mild sunny winters, moderate summers with low humidity, varied topography, mountains, and abundance of water area (map 1). The association of this variable with net migration from 1992–94 is apparent (map 2).

In studies that estimate the effects of economic and locational factors on migration while controlling for effects of other factors, natural amenities emerges as the strongest single factor associated with net immigration to rural counties in the early 1990s. Rurality itself (measured as a function of distance from major population centers) also was positively associated with net immigration in the mid 1990s, whereas that relationship had been negative as recently as the late 1980s.

## Rural communities can build on their natural endowments

The increasing importance of residential and recreational desirability creates new opportunities for rural areas. Although economic strategies will continue to be important to the vitality of rural communities, strategies that build on their natural amenities and rural residential desirability will become increasingly important. Of course, communities can't change their climate or import mountains.

Nevertheless, they can protect and enhance (and, to some extent, market) the natural resources they do have. And they can complement the natural advantage of rurality itself with other factors such as health, education, and cultural services that make rural communities attractive places for people to live and recreate.

## For more information

Further details about the effects of natural amenities and rurality on migration are available in *Migration and Economic Restructuring in Nonmetro America, 1989–94*, ERS Staff Paper #9615, by John B. Cromartie and Mark Nord, published by the Economic Research Service in 1996. The construction of the ERS natural amenities index is described in *Factors Associated with Rural Economic Growth*, Technical Bulletin #1850, by Lorin D. Kusmin, John M. Redman, and David W. Sears, published by the Economic Research Service in 1996.

Map 2. Net Domestic Immigration 1992–94

Source: Prepared by ERS using data from the Internal Revenue Service County Migration File

