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Amenities Increasingly Draw People to the Rural West

Recent migrants to the rural West increasingly cite both physical and social environment amenities as reasons why they moved. Job-related reasons are cited by only about 30 percent of the respondents in two surveys. People want to see greater environmental stewardship of the Federal lands surrounding their communities, and these sentiments do not vary greatly by rural/urban location, length of residency, occupation, or other demographic characteristics. The survey results suggest a need to incorporate noneconomic factors more directly into regional development theories and their applications.

More people are moving to rural areas for reasons that have nothing to do with employment. Several surveys have explored why people in other regions of the country have moved to rural areas, but research regarding the rural West has been very limited. This is surprising because the rural West is one of the fastest growing regions in the United States. This article presents some findings from recent survey research, first from counties throughout the American West, and then with a specific focus on the Northwest region. My aim is not just to ascertain why people moved, but also to understand the attitudes these new residents bring with them.

Earlier Surveys and Theories of Migration

Surveys in the 1970's began to show that, if given a choice, people prefer to live in small towns and even in rural areas. Amenities such as environmental quality and pace of life were becoming important in explaining why people move. The apparent sudden preference of people for rural life shocked many academics and planners because rural areas were thought to be at a major disadvantage compared with urban areas.

These findings also were a surprise because they conflicted with the major assumptions of migration theory, or

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why people move. Simply put, people were thought to move because they wanted to increase or maximize their incomes. People, it was assumed, did a rough benefit-cost analysis in their heads; if the benefits, measured in terms of increased income, were greater than the costs, people moved. This approach, however, failed to explain why people moved out of cities into places like the rural West.

Most of the 1970's studies of why people were moving to rural areas were conducted in the Midwest, a region not expected to have population growth. But few studies were done in the rural West, an area with many counties even farther from traditional centers of growth. And few followup studies were done in the 1980's to see if the preferences for moving to rural areas were similar to those of the 1970's.

1980's Survey of High-Amenity Counties

In the late 1980's, I headed a study investigating why 1,800 people migrated into western counties with high levels of physical amenities (see "Survey Data and Methods"). People who migrate to high-amenity counties are often assumed to be retirees, as the growth and development of States like Arizona and Florida bears out. In our survey, however, only 10 percent of the new migrants were over 65 years of age. Instead, migrants were more likely to be young, highly educated professionals. This was unexpected since, according to the logic of the economic model, rural areas neither attract entrepreneurs nor provide jobs.

Table 1

Dissatisfaction with previous location and importance of attributes of present county in decision to move*Pace of life is conspicuous as both a negative urban "push" factor and a positive rural "pull" factor*

| Factors | Push | | Pull | |
|------------------------|--------------|-----------|-----------|---------------|
| | Dissatisfied | Satisfied | Important | Not important |
| | Percent | | | |
| Employment opportunity | 16 | 67 | 30 | 56 |
| Cost of living | 14 | 64 | 14 | 58 |
| Climate | 22 | 57 | 47 | 28 |
| Social services | 7 | 85 | 10 | 69 |
| Family access | 11 | 76 | 19 | 64 |
| Outdoor recreation | 18 | 63 | 59 | 20 |
| Crime rate | 28 | 48 | 31 | 45 |
| Scenery | 20 | 62 | 72 | 13 |
| Pace of life | 31 | 47 | 62 | 18 |
| Environmental quality | 30 | 46 | 65 | 16 |

Source: Gundars Rudzitis and Harley E. Johansen, *Amenities, Migration and Nonmetro Development*, report to the National Science Foundation, 1989.

People also move out of dissatisfaction with their previous location, resulting from crime, congestion, pollution, or other "urban" ills. However, we found that most western migrants were not particularly dissatisfied with the places they had left (table 1). For example, 28 and 30 percent of the migrants said they were dissatisfied with the crime rate and environmental quality of their previous location. The lack of employment opportunity and cost of living were cited by 16 and 14 percent. When asked what "pulled" or attracted them to the western counties, 30 percent cited employment opportunities and 31 percent the lack of crime as important factors. Instead, they gave more importance to scenery (72 percent), environmental quality (65 percent), pace of life (62 percent), outdoor recreation opportunities (59 percent), and climate (47 percent).

When asked what single factor was the most important in their decision to move to their current county, 23 percent cited employment opportunities. Of the other attributes of the county, those contributing to the social environment accounted for 42 percent of the most important reasons for moving, while those specific to the physical environment made up 35 percent. Thus, amenity characteristics provided 77 percent of the reasons that people moved and employment-related reasons 23 percent.

The importance of employment opportunities did not vary much by age, except for persons over 65. For example, 31 percent of those age 20-35 gave employment opportunities as the major reason for moving, compared with 29 percent for persons age 36-50 and 16 percent for those 51-65. Family access, at 24 percent, was the single most important "pull" factor for people over age 65, followed closely by climate (21 percent) and outdoor recreation (21 percent). Outdoor recreation, pace of life, scenery, and climate were cited as the second and third most important factors by the younger age groups.

In this study, 45 percent of the western migrants came from metro areas and 55 percent from nonmetro areas. Migrants from metro areas were more likely to have grown up in a large city or suburban area, completed college, and be in a professional, technical, or managerial occupation. Even though levels of dissatisfaction with their previous residence were generally low, people from metro areas were more likely to be dissatisfied with the crime rate (39 percent vs. 19 percent), pace of life (39 percent vs. 24 percent), and environmental quality (38 percent vs. 24 percent).

People from metro areas were more likely to cite as "pulls" environmental quality (72 percent vs. 59 percent), scenery (77 percent vs. 67 percent), pace of life (69 percent vs. 55 percent), outdoor recreation (64 percent vs. 54 percent), and the crime rate (37 percent vs. 25 percent). People from nonmetro areas were more likely to cite employment opportunity (33 percent vs. 26 percent) and family access (21 percent vs. 16 percent).

So, although there are some differences between people based on whether they moved from a metro or nonmetro setting, both groups consistently emphasize the importance of noneconomic factors in their decision to move. Only 25 percent of all migrants had higher incomes after moving. Instead, 46 percent had decreases in income, while 28 percent had no significant change. People from metro areas were more likely (52 percent vs. 42 percent) to have lower incomes after the move. Most were relatively young people who found jobs in the places they moved to. This suggests either that the migrants' real adjusted incomes are the same in their present location or that declines in income are offset by environmental and quality-of-life considerations.

To indicate perceived change in quality of life, western migrants were asked if they felt life in their new places was less stressful, more enjoyable, happier, and healthier.

Table 2

Three most important reasons for moving to or staying in area*Employment is cited as a primary factor in selecting a destination in one-third of all cases*

| Factors | Reason | | |
|---|--------|---------|-------|
| | First | Second | Third |
| | | Percent | |
| Employment opportunity | 34.1 | 10.3 | 6.4 |
| Access to family and friends (s) | 23.9 | 15.0 | 6.3 |
| Pace of lifestyle (s) | 12.9 | 12.1 | 21.5 |
| Outdoor recreation (p) | 7.1 | 15.6 | 16.0 |
| Landscape, scenery, and environment (p) | 6.2 | 14.9 | 16.9 |
| Climate (p) | 4.8 | 11.2 | 10.8 |
| Quality of schools (s) | 3.5 | 6.0 | 3.7 |
| Other | 3.0 | 1.6 | 5.9 |
| Cost of living (s) | 2.3 | 9.1 | 6.1 |
| Crime rate (s) | 1.9 | 3.4 | 5.9 |
| Social services (s) | .4 | .7 | .6 |

s = social environment; p = physical.

Source: G. Rudzitis, C. Watrous, H. Johansen, *Public Views On Public Lands: A Survey of Interior Columbia River Basin Residents*, Department of Geography, University of Idaho, 1995.

In each case, 70 to 80 percent of the migrants agreed that it was, with migrants from metro areas especially positive. Another indication of their satisfaction with their new places was their reluctance to move elsewhere anytime soon. Indeed, most of them indicated that they would look for employment where they lived or in the immediate region even if they lost their current jobs.

In summary, the survey clearly showed that economic motives do not explain why most people moved, that people were very satisfied with where they moved, and that they did not plan to move in the near future. The few other studies done in the West also showed that nonemployment amenities were the primary reasons for moving, with around 30 percent of migrants citing employment reasons.

Public Lands Attract Environmentally Concerned Migrants

One of the attractive forces pulling people to areas in the more rural West is the presence of Federal lands. In 1995, my colleagues and I addressed motives for migration in a 100-county contiguous area in the interior Columbia River Basin, which included all of Idaho and parts of Washington, Oregon, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, and Nevada (see "Survey Data and Methods").

Anywhere from 25 to over 80 percent of this land is owned and managed by the Federal Government, so this study also looked at the importance of the major public lands amenities in the region and how people thought they should be managed.

Again, when asked to choose the most important reason for moving to or living in their county, just over 34 per-

cent of respondents cited employment opportunity (table 2). Forty-five percent considered the amenities related to the social environment as most important, and 18 percent the physical environment.

As second most important reason for moving, respondents cited outdoor recreation the most at 16 percent. Employment opportunities were sixth at 10 percent. The social environment captured 47 percent of second reasons for residence, and the physical environment 42 percent. The same trend is apparent for the third most important reason; pace of lifestyle leads at 22 percent, with employment opportunities only 6 percent. As further indication of the importance of the social/physical environment, 28 percent said they moved first and looked for/created a job after the move.

Much has been written about the distinctiveness and appeal of small-town life. In the rural West especially, the

Survey Data and Methods

The data were obtained from two different surveys. The first survey, from a sample of 15 counties selected from 278 high-amenity counties, was mailed to respondents at random. The 3,754 respondents were evenly divided between migrants and residents. A person was considered a migrant if he or she had moved into the county within the last 10 years.

The second survey was designed to reach a scientifically representative sample of residents in a 100-county area in the interior Columbia Basin. A proportional cluster sampling method was used, with eight counties chosen to be in the sample. People were randomly selected and sent a mail survey. Of 571 respondents, 43 percent had migrated into the area in the last 10 years.

Table 3

Most important public land uses cited by newcomers to the rural West*Newcomers prefer environmental protection over commodity production*

| Land uses | Reason | | |
|------------------------------------|--------|---------|-------|
| | First | Second | Third |
| | | Percent | |
| Protect water/watershed (p) | 20.2 | 14.4 | 13.2 |
| Protect ecosystems (p) | 18.3 | 8.4 | 10.4 |
| Recreational uses (p/c) | 16.9 | 13.1 | 22.2 |
| Timber harvesting (c) | 16.3 | 14.2 | 7.5 |
| Preserve wilderness values (p) | 9.6 | 16.0 | 9.3 |
| Protect fish/wildlife habitat (p) | 9.1 | 19.3 | 13.6 |
| Grazing and ranching (c) | 5.9 | 7.6 | 12.8 |
| Protect endangered species (p) | 1.4 | 3.8 | 6.4 |
| Mineral exploration/extraction (c) | .5 | 3.1 | 4.6 |
| Other (written in) | 1.7 | .2 | n/a |

p = protection; c = commodity production; n/a = not applicable.

Source: G. Rudzitis, C. Watrous, H. Johansen, *Public Views On Public Lands: A Survey of Interior Columbia River Basin Residents*, Department of Geography, University of Idaho, 1995.

physical environment is both a separate and highly inter-related component of where and how people live. Given the conflicts over the management of the Federal lands (that is for logging, recreation, wilderness preservation) that comprise a major portion of the 100-county survey area, people were asked if they cared how those lands were managed.

People moving to the region may do so for reasons related to the social environment and the physical landscape but not care about specific Federal land management practices. We found this not to be true, since 92 percent were concerned with how Federal lands were managed. The most frequent preferences for managing Federal lands were water/watershed and ecosystem protection (table 3). Timber harvesting was cited by 16 percent, grazing and ranching by 6 percent, and mineral exploration/mining by less than 1 percent. Overall, protective strategies made up 76 percent of the preferred management strategies and commodity-based strategies 23 percent. This same trend is evident for the second and third most stated preferences. These findings also contradict the longstanding view of the Federal lands as a public warehouse of commodities to be harvested and jobs to be filled. For newcomers in the rural West, the value of these public lands is related to protecting and preserving them.

It is often assumed that views on how Federal lands should be managed will vary greatly depending on where people live (urban vs. rural), how long they have lived there (migrants vs. old-timers), their occupations (loggers and other resource workers vs. professional occupations), as well as by age and sex. Although some differences were demonstrated in the survey between different groups, they were not large. For example, differences between urban and rural residents normally ranged from 5 to 10 percentage points. Whereas 76 percent in urban

areas thought managing for wilderness values was important, so did 66 percent in rural places. Water and watershed protection was considered important by 83 percent of urban residents and 81 percent of rural residents.

Rural and urban people differed more on commodity strategies. About 71 percent of rural persons favored some timber harvesting, compared with 62 percent of urbanites. The differences shrink over grazing and ranching, with 60 percent of people in rural areas favoring these uses compared with 54 percent of urban respondents. Both groups were in almost complete agreement on mineral exploration and development, with only 32 percent rural and 31 percent urban thinking it an important use of public lands.

Few differences exceeding 6 percentage points existed between recent migrants and long-term residents, though newcomers rated protection of endangered species higher (61 percent vs. 43 percent). Similarly, people in resource occupations were less likely than people in other occupations to rate the protection of endangered species as important (28 percent vs. 48 percent). They were also less likely to consider wilderness protection as important (59 percent vs. 74 percent). People in resource and other occupations held very strong and similar views regarding the importance of policies to protect water/watersheds, fish and wildlife habitat, ecosystems, and to provide recreational uses on Federal lands. Older people in the region were more in favor of extractive strategies, while females rated protective strategies higher. However, except for protecting endangered species and preserving wilderness values, the differences are around 5 percentage points.

These findings are important because surveys about attitudes toward Federal lands are even scarcer than surveys about why people move to and live in the American West. Regardless of demographic characteristics, rural or urban

residency, length of residency, or occupation, most western people favor protective strategies. The emphasis appears to be on good stewardship, with commodity production allowed only if the ecosystems of the Federal lands are not degraded.

Amenities Are the Key to Making Places Desirable

In the rural West, and probably elsewhere, employment alone is insufficient to explain why people move and live where they do. Often, the amenities of places single them out as desirable living environments. Any rural development strategy should honor the simple notion of place and social/physical environments. We need to consider how and where people want to live the “good” life.

When faced with tradeoffs, people in the West expressed a preference for environmental protection of the public lands and their associated ecosystems. This preference seems to acknowledge the link between protection of the environment and long-term stability and growth of local economies. The “good” life is lived in a place, and what, in part, makes a place unique in the West is lots of public open space, a clean environment, wilderness, and friendly neighbors.

The economic value of many places and regions may well be enhanced by preserving, sustaining, and strengthening both the physical and social environment within which they exist. Maintaining a high-quality environment can become a development strategy.

Development strategies need to recognize the importance of place attachments, the value of good neighbors, social interactions, and the values people place on their social/physical environments. This kind of development theory would better represent the hopes and desires of the people who consistently cite the importance of noneconomic reasons for why they live in the rural West and often sacrifice economic gains in order to do so.

For Further Reading . . .

Gundars Rudzitis, *Wilderness and the Changing American West*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1996.

John M. Wardwell and James H. Copp, editors, *Population Change in the Rural West: 1975-1990*, New York: University Press of America, 1997.