



Research paper

How do amenity migrants learn to be environmental stewards of rural landscapes?

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Nonhuman agency is central to experiential learning in environmental management.
- Durable dispositions for stewardship emerge through experiential learning.
- Environmental policy must consider the timing and location of landholder engagement.

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ABSTRACT

The changing socio-ecological dynamics in rural landscapes associated with amenity migration in post-industrial nations such as Australia has implications for environmental management. The number of non-farming landholders now occupying regions once valued primarily for agriculture has increased rapidly in the past decade, with property turnover rates in some rural Australian regions as high as 50 per cent. Given amenity migrants can shape rural ecologies through land management practice, it is vital that we understand how these management practices are informed. As such, we ask: how do amenity migrants learn to be environmental stewards of their land? We focus specifically on how the tangible interaction between landholder and landscape through experiential learning contributes to the emergence of environmental stewardship. We adopt a conceptual premise that recognises the agency of the biophysical landscape in the experiential learning process. To explore how amenity migrants learn about stewardship we undertook a qualitative case study in the hinterland regions of Melbourne, Australia. We found that initial struggles to implement land management informed by prior urban lifestyles saw landholders turn to experiential learning to fill a void of understanding about ecological processes and management practice. Over time, these experiences distilled into durable dispositions for environmental stewardship that directed either a passive (hands-off) or active (hands-on) approach to land management. Understanding how amenity migrants learn to be environmental stewards has implications for the location and timing of environmental policy engagements with new rural landholders.

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1. Introduction

The increasing migration of non-farming landholders to rural regions is a well-documented phenomenon across many post-industrial nations (Abrams, Gill, Gosnell, & Klepeis, 2012; Gosnell, 2011; Klepeis, Gill, & Chisholm, 2009). Areas once valued primarily for productive agriculture have become increasingly valued for their natural, aesthetic and lifestyle qualities (Argent, Tonts,

Jones, & Holmes, 2010; Holmes, 2006). While this paper focuses on Australia specifically, similar trends in rural landscape change have been observed in Canada and the US (Gosnell, 2011), the UK (Phillips, 1993) and across continental Europe (López-i-Gelats, Tàbara, & Bartolomé, 2009; Van Auken, 2010). The shifting socio-ecological dynamics associated with rural landscape change presents uncertainty about how new rural landholders will manage their land in ways that might differ from productively-orientated farmers (Gosnell, 2011; Kondo, Rivera, & Rullman, 2012; Yung & Belsky, 2007).

This paper is specifically interested in understanding the environmental stewardship of ‘amenity migrants’ (defined below) in the hinterlands of Melbourne, Australia, in order to inform

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environmental management research and policy. In particular, we ask: how do amenity migrants learn to be environmental stewards? For the purpose of this paper, we adopt a deliberately broad definition of stewardship as the way in which landholders conceive of responsible management of the ecologies on their property, in order to achieve both public and private benefits (Gill, Klepeis, & Chisholm, 2010; Gill, 2013; Worrell & Appleby, 2000). This definition differs from more normative definitions aligned with notions of 'best practice' environmental management amongst farmers (Lawrence, Richards, & Cheshire, 2004). Given limited existing understanding of how stewardship is informed amongst amenity migrants we wanted to capture the aspects of stewardship that amenity migrants bring with them to rural landscapes (Mendham, Curtis, & Millar, 2012), as well as the stewardship that emerge through inter-relationships with nature over time (Gill, 2013).

1.1. 'Amenity migration' and its environmental management implications

In this paper we adopt the term 'amenity migration' to describe the process of rural landscape transition (Argent et al., 2010; Kondo et al., 2012). The amenity that migrants seek is often associated with the 'natural' values and aesthetics of rural areas, the recreational opportunities they provide and the pursuit of 'the simple life' that is perceived to come with leaving the hustle and bustle of the city (Argent et al., 2010). Amenity migrants can include retirees (Curry, Koczberski, & Selwood, 2001), young families and people looking for a second home outside of the city (Kondo et al., 2012). As such, the term 'amenity' is being deployed here in a broad sense, to capture the diverse aspirations of migrants.

In terms of environmental impacts, amenity migration can result in the subdivision of farmland into smaller land parcels and increasingly heterogeneous land use, raising concerns about the fragmentation of ecosystems (Carmona-Torres, Parra-López, Groot, & Rossing, 2011; Gobster & Rickenbach, 2004). The resultant mosaic of smaller properties can complicate landscape-scale ecological management efforts like habitat restoration or weed removal (Klepeis et al., 2009; Urquhart & Courtney, 2011). Pressure may also be placed on ecosystems through clearing of vegetation for house blocks, fences and recreational land use. While many in-migrants have an interest in pursuing environmental management on their properties (Mendham et al., 2012) the diversity of actors and land use preferences presents a challenging picture for environmental management.

The shifting social dynamics associated with amenity migration sees new rural landholders often possessing a different perspective on rural landscapes than farmers (Cadieux & Hurley, 2009; Klepeis et al., 2009; Mendham & Curtis, 2010). For example, the pursuit of an 'idyllic' rural lifestyle can manifest in a desire for seclusion on one's land (Meadows, Herbohn, & Emtage, 2013; Urquhart & Courtney, 2011; Yung & Belsky, 2007). As a result, amenity migrants can become very 'property-centric' in their ecological interests (Cadieux, 2011; Gill et al., 2010). A desire for 'getting on with it' (, p. 321) independently on one's own property contrasts with efforts to work collectively across property boundaries to address ecological challenges – like invasive plants – commonly associated with environmental management in farming communities (Yung & Belsky, 2007).

While amenity migrants may be motivated to pursue environmental management, their potentially limited familiarity with the rural landscapes creates uncertainty around the practice and outcome of their management efforts (Mendham et al., 2012). For example, amenity migrants can be unaware of local weed species (Klepeis et al., 2009), while having minimal experience with practical land management tasks like fencing (Curry et al., 2001). Moreover, the aspirations of new rural landholders to be

environmental stewards can be bound up with other land use motives, like recreation (Urquhart & Courtney, 2011) or improving visual amenity (Knoot, Schulte, & Rickenbach, 2010), which can produce unpredictable environmental outcomes. As such, there is significant uncertainty surrounding our understanding of how environmental stewardship emerges and is materialised in the landscape, given the complex socio-ecological transformations associated with amenity migration.

1.2. The environmental stewardship of amenity migrants

Amenity migrants' diverse land use interests and potentially limited exposure to rural landscapes suggests their existing ideas of environmental stewardship will be built on as they establish their amenity lifestyles. In farming contexts, stewardship has been shown to have a strong emergent dimension over time, linked to interaction with the physical landscape and knowledge passed between generations of farmers and amongst farming communities (Trigger, Toussaint, & Mulcock, 2010; Turner & Berkes, 2006). As a consequence, the stewardship of farmers shapes the trajectories of ecological change over time, and is a central consideration in environmental policy design and implementation (Burton, Kuczera, & Schwarz, 2008; Burton, 2012; Greiner & Gregg, 2011; Junge, Lindemann-Matthies, Hunziker, & Schüpbach, 2011). We suggest that a more in-depth understanding of the on-ground land management practices of amenity migrants could provide an avenue for critical insights into how new rural landholders learn to be environmental stewards (Gill et al., 2010); these insights will have implications for environmental management practice and policy in rural landscapes. Moreover, new experiments with environmental policy that target rural landscapes where amenity migration is occurring means that the implications of emergent stewardship are both timely and critical for policy makers (Cocklin, Mautner, & Dibden, 2007; Cooke, Langford, Gordon, & Bekessy, 2012). To explore how stewardship emerges we conducted interviews and participant observation with landholders to interrogate the experiential learning that occurs through the interactions between amenity migrants and the rural landscapes they come to inhabit.

1.3. Environmental stewardship, land management practice and experiential learning

The land management practices of amenity migrants present a useful starting point for interrogating the emergence of environmental stewardship. Indeed, we are specifically interested in how stewardship emerges *through* the practice of managing, interacting with and observing the landscape in which one is situated. While we recognise that there are a number of avenues for learning that are relevant for exploring emergent stewardship, like social learning (Keen & Mahanty, 2006; Pannell et al., 2006) and NRM extension information (Reed et al., 2010), we posit that experiential learning, or learning-by-doing, holds particular relevance. There are two key reasons for focusing on experiential learning.

First, extensive research on experiential learning in NRM and farming has highlighted the prominent role of learning-by-doing and trial-and-error management in learning about ecological function and environmental management (Armitage et al., 2009; Berkes & Turner, 2006; Palis, 2006; Pannell et al., 2006). As ecologies change through human intervention and natural processes, trial and error management becomes pivotal for learning how to respond to changing landscapes (Armitage et al., 2009; Berkes & Turner, 2006). Given the knowledge that farmers possess about ecological processes that is generated through the lived experience of landscape over time (Knapp & Fernandez-Gimenez, 2009; Palis, 2006; Van Herzele, Dendoncker, & Acosta-Michlik, 2010), the

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