

Understanding rural character: Cognitive and visual perceptions

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Abstract

This study examines perceptions of rural character from the varied perspective of local residents, urban recreationalists, and planners. Using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the research focused on two small towns in western Washington which are facing growth pressures. Study results show that density is less important in an individual's perceptions of rural character than are concepts of community, livelihood, and signs of development and change. Although perceptions of rural character can vary from setting to setting, our findings suggest the need for planners to factor in the perspectives of local players. To maintain rural character, we recommend: (1) protecting property in natural resource uses such as farming or forestry, (2) using design guidelines that match traditional lot sizes and building materials, and (3) incorporating community-participation techniques in rural planning.

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1. Introduction

Establishing the precise meaning of “rural,” let alone “rural character,” is difficult. Heyer (1990) pg. 1 compares looking for rural character to looking for pornography: “it’s very difficult to define, but you know it when you see it.” Planners in US cities and counties have traditionally defined and protected rural character through different density designations and design guidelines. For example, King and Kittitas Counties, Washington (where this study takes place); Fulton County, Georgia, Loudoun County, Virginia and Sonoma County, California all have specific planning policies to guide the protection of rural character (Fulton County, 2001; King County, 2000; Kittitas County, 1999; Loudoun County, 2001; Sonoma County, 1989).

Reasons to protect rural areas and their character are numerous. Rural areas located in urban fringe counties with an agricultural economy account for almost half of total crop sales in the US (Butler and Maronek, 2002). Scenic resources and recreation opportunities can bring employment opportunities and an increased tax base from second home developments in rural areas that may have declining natural resource industries (Green

et al., 1996; Grirard and Gartner, 1993). However, reliance on seasonal recreational tourism may create unstable service-sector employment and conflicts over land use regulation (Theobald et al., 1996). Rural character may also be valued for its community qualities. Beatley (2004) argues that places that foster social interactions and community building will have healthier community members, both physically and emotionally.

Unfettered growth and development can lead to a negative impact on the economic resources, aesthetic qualities, and sense of community in rural areas (Power, 2000); planners are faced with challenge of designing policies to protect rural character. However, the question remains as to whose rural character is protected with these regulations?

Using visual and cognitive methodology to assess how different groups of people perceive rural character, this study brings us one step closer in understanding the relationship between perceptions of rural character and the density regulations and design guidelines aimed at protecting them.

1.1. Current approaches in examining and planning for rural character

Planners, academics, and others have used two methodological approaches in an effort to identify rural character. The visual approach has mainly taken the form of photo-questionnaires

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(Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1985) that ask residents to rate scenes by preference (Brabec, 2001; Julta, 1997; Krohn, 1992; Nelessen, 1994, 1990; Strumse, 1996), by preference-related factors such as structure and information (Schauman, 1988), or more specifically by their concept of rural character (Ryan, 2002; Tucker, 1991). The scenes used in these studies contained barns, historic buildings, residential homes, local businesses, and natural landscapes. Assessments drawn from this approach have helped towns implement design guidelines to protect visual resources.

Sullivan (1996) and Ryan (2002) used scenes to rate different scenarios of clustered developments. In the Sullivan (1996) study, rural residents, farmers and township planning commissioners rated three clustered development scenarios for adequacy of rural living, including rural character, and for satisfaction in terms of layout, neighbors, and natural setting. The “edge-following development pattern” where houses are clustered between farm land and a wooded area had the highest adequacy and satisfaction ratings (Sullivan, 1996). Ryan (2002) asked rural residents to rate clustered developments and traditional single rural lot developments based on their compatibility with the rural character of the area finding that scenes with high amounts of open space were rated as the most compatible, regardless of development pattern. These two studies shed much light on how new patterns of development in a rural area are perceived by those living in that area. However, they do not clarify how conceptual or cultural constructs, such as sense of community and livelihood, can affect visual perceptions of rural character. Ryan (2002) does include a pre-defined scale of items related to rural character, although this scale only deals with visual elements of rural character such as country roads and old churches.

The cognitive, or cultural, approach examines the conceptual attributes of rural character independent of visual attributes. Cognitive studies usually employ qualitative methodology such as interviews, surveys, and ethnographies and are largely sociological in focus (Halfacree, 1995; Murdoch and Pratt, 1993; Philo, 1992; Smith and Sharp, 2005; Willits and Luloff, 1995). As a typical example, Halfacree (1995) contrasts the mythical “rural idyll” concept with perceptions of residents of small English Parishes. He found that while most residents did adhere to a “rural idyll” concept, individual perceptions of such components as safety, community, and simplicity varied widely (Halfacree, 1995). However, Halfacree does not systematically examine how one’s tenure or geographic location may influence perceptions of rural character.

The object of many cognitive studies, particularly those by Dubbink (1984) and Fitchen (1991), has not been to help formulate a planning policy to protect rural character but rather to illustrate the *need* for a planning policy to protect the area from further change due to population and/or tourism growth. These studies identify change as a visual concept (e.g., development, natural resource decline, etc.). However, they typically neglect to assess what is visually acceptable and unacceptable in terms of rural character, leaving an incomplete picture of how cognitive ideas of rural character – such as family and community – relate to visual aspects of rural character.

1.2. Study objectives

This study integrates both visual and cognitive methodological approaches to document how rural character is perceived by rural residents, urban recreationalists, and planners. By examining the similarities and differences among these groups, we will be able to make inferences about how density regulations and design guidelines can protect rural character and under what perceptual basis.

1.3. Study area

Snoqualmie and Roslyn, two rural towns in western Washington State, served as the study sites (Fig. 1). Both towns are located near the I-90 highway corridor that extends along an urban-rural gradient from the western edge of the Seattle metropolitan area, with an estimated population of 573,000 (Washington State Office of Financial Management, 2005), over the Cascade Mountains into eastern Washington.

Once primarily a timber-based community, Snoqualmie has grown into a bedroom community due to its close proximity to I-90 and Seattle. Recently, Snoqualmie has experienced rapid growth and change due to a master-planned community development, Snoqualmie Ridge, within its city limits. Since the outset of this study in late 2001, its population of 1631 (2000 Census) has risen to 6345 (Washington State Office of Financial Management, 2005).

Snoqualmie is located in King County which has an estimated population of 1,808,300 (Washington State Office of Financial Management, 2005). To comply with the Washington State Growth Management Act (1990), King County has taken steps to protect rural character by enacting zoning designations that range from one home per twenty acres to one home per two and one-half acres (King County, 2001). Applicability of zoning type depends upon the existing pattern of development, community character, and critical environments. To maintain traditional rural development patterns, county policy favors large-size lot development (King County, 2001).

By contrast, Roslyn is a historic mining town whose population of 1020 (Washington State Office of Financial Management, 2005) remained stable during the study period. While Roslyn is expected to grow, its development will be stimulated by construction of a large destination resort rather than by a large residential community. At the time of the study, plans for the resort development were awaiting approval from the state Growth Management Hearing Board, which has since approved it.

Situated east of King County in the Cascade Mountains, Roslyn is located in Kittitas County, a sparsely populated county with an estimated population of 36,600 (Washington State Office of Financial Management, 2005). The Kittitas County Comprehensive Plan defines rural character as “places without conveniences where you earn your living” (Kittitas Comprehensive Plan, 1999). Kittitas County protects rural character by using small-lot clustered zoning (Kittitas Comprehensive Plan, 1999).

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