



Re-thinking rural-amenity ecologies for environmental management in the Anthropocene



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ABSTRACT

The migration of lifestyle-orientated landholders (amenity migrants) to rural landscapes is resulting in the production of new rural ecologies. To date, the future implications of these ecologies for environmental management have been framed largely in 'traditional' conservation biology terms, focusing on how we can conserve or restore natural environments to a past ecological benchmark. However, the Anthropocene provides an opportunity to critically examine how we can progress environmental management in a way that locates ecologies as emergent products of human–environment interaction through time. We extend from Tim Ingold's work on wayfaring to position people and plants in environmental management as cohabitants who are traversing a world that is continually in the making. We conducted qualitative research in the hinterlands of Melbourne, Australia, involving narrative interviews with landholders and walking their property with them, using a form of participant observation called the 'walkabout' method. We found that the conservation aspirations of amenity migrants were mediated by the landscape histories that were embodied in the plants they engaged with on their property. These embodied landscape histories served to structure the trajectory of ecological emergence in which landholders were a part. We develop the concept of 'landscape legacy' to explain how past actions and future aspirations come together in management practice to produce novel and often unanticipated ecologies. Landscape legacy grounds the Anthropocene in everyday environments, capturing the need to progress environmental management as a wild experiment in rural-amenity landscapes, focusing on ecological form, function, relationship and process.

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1. Introduction

Amenity migration is producing new rural-amenity ecologies in many post-industrial nations, as regions that were once the domain of productive agriculture now encompass a suite of aesthetic, recreational and lifestyle land uses. To date, the future implications of these ecologies for environmental management have been framed largely in 'traditional' conservation biology terms. This framing has focused on the threats or opportunities presented by rural-amenity migration for conservation or restoration of 'natural' environments to a past ecological benchmark. We suggest that the long history of human modification that characterises rural ecologies, combined with uncertainty about future ecological trajectories in light of global environmental change processes, presents an opportunity for re-framing rural-amenity

ecologies and, by extension, re-thinking environmental management in rural-amenity landscapes (Abrams et al., 2012; Harris et al., 2006).

Human modification of global earth systems has now seen more than three quarters of earth's biomes converted into 'anthromes' (anthropocentric biomes) (Ellis, 2013), where human use and activity are now predominant. Geographers and ecologists engaged with conservation biology research are increasingly accepting of the prevalence of anthropogenic influence, which is beginning to shift traditional notions of conservation and restoration ecology (Marris, 2011). Either directly or indirectly, an increasing proportion of research and discussion on the implications of human-dominated landscapes for conservation biology has progressed via the global-scale concept of the Anthropocene (detailed below). The Anthropocene positions ecologies as temporally emergent products of human and nonhuman interactions, rather than as natural 'pre-human' artifacts (Castree, 2014). We use the Anthropocene's attentiveness to time and nonhuman agency to re-frame the question of ecological implications for rural-amenity migration

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by asking: how are rural-amenity ecologies produced through interactions between people and plants over time? By grounding the Anthropocene at the scale of tangible, everyday interaction between people and plants, we deploy the concept in a way that can progress environmental management in rural-amenity landscapes in a context where pre-human notions of nature no longer apply (Castree, 2014; Lorimer and Driessen, 2014; Ellis, 2013).

To explore the future implications for environmental management in rural-amenity landscapes we interrogate how local-level ecologies are produced on private properties through intimate interactions between people and plants in the hinterlands of Melbourne, Australia. To understand the temporal processes at play, we focus on how amenity migrants engage with the legacy of past human–environmental interactions embodied in the contemporary landscape in the course of their plant-based land management practices. We suggest that the way in which past human–environment interactions translate into the present and future will need to be carefully considered if we are to navigate a more reflexive approach to environmental management in the Anthropocene.

In this paper we consciously focus on the more recent phase of post-colonial land use. While acknowledging that a rich history of indigenous land use shaped Australian ecologies that have too frequently been rendered as ‘wilderness’, absent of human agency (Gammage, 2011; Trigger et al., 2008; Rose, 1996), contemporary environmental management responds to the dominant transformative process set in train by more recent and intensive post-colonial land use. Moreover, as we will discuss, it is this recent landscape modification that research participants often aspire to reverse through their amenity migration.

British colonisation since 1788 has also provided a ubiquitous delineation of the ‘nativeness’ of Australia’s flora and fauna. As a result, restoration and conservation is often framed around a return to a pre-colonial assemblage of native species (Chew and Hamilton, 2011). As has been increasingly argued, colonial demarcations of native and non-native need to be de-centred in recognition of the historically contingent and social constructed dimensions of nativeness (Ginn, 2008; Head, 2011; Mastnak et al., 2014). This de-centring helps make space for Indigenous Australians in the making of pre-colonial ecologies and increase management reflexivity in the Anthropocene. While we seek to contribute to this de-centring of nativeness, we retain the traditional descriptors of native and non-native (weed, introduced, invasive) to reflect the terminology used by research participants.

2. The ecological implications of amenity migration

The diversification of rural land use is seeing landscapes that were once valued for their productive capacity become increasingly valued for their consumptive amenity values (scenery, recreation), as an increasing number of people seek a rural lifestyle change (Gosnell, 2011; Tonts et al., 2011; López-i-Gelats et al., 2009; Holmes, 2006; Paquette and Domon, 2003). Despite a history of amenity migration into rural areas stretching back to the 1970s and beyond (Curry et al., 2001), its recent acceleration has brought a range of land use and environmental management issues to the forefront of policy and academic debate (Abrams et al., 2012; Larsen et al., 2007; Barr, 2005).

Amongst the issues associated with amenity migration have been concerns about the types of new rural-amenity ecologies that will emerge as a result of changing land use (Abrams et al., 2012). As noted above, the rural landscape changes associated with amenity migration have been largely framed in terms of positive or negative future implications for the natural environment. The negative ecological consequences centre on the potential for species

loss and ecological fragmentation as farmland is sub-divided into small lifestyle-orientated lots (Argent et al., 2010). Negative implications have also been raised regarding the preferences of some amenity migrants to pursue management for recreational purposes, resulting in the retention of species for aesthetic reasons over institutional environmental management efforts aimed at ‘bringing back’ a rare species (Urquhart and Courtney, 2011; Knot et al., 2010; Van Auken, 2010).

Running counter to the narrative of negative ecological ‘impacts’ are suggestions that rural-amenity migration is actually catalysing ecological restoration and conservation activities. A motivation to preserve and restore native ecologies is an aspiration for a host of rural-amenity migrants (Cooke and Lane, 2015; Mendham et al., 2012; Gill et al., 2010). Indeed, some landholders purchase rural property with the express intention of pursuing conservation as their core land use activity (Yung and Belsky, 2007; Jackson-Smith and Kreuter, 2005). At a regional level, ecological regeneration has been reported in select rural areas that have seen an increase in amenity migration and a reduction in intensive agriculture in recent decades (Walker et al., 2003).

We view the ‘positive/negative ecological futures’ framing of emerging rural-amenity ecologies as problematic for two central reasons: (1) it ignores the long history of pre and post colonial human modification that has shaped rural-amenity landscapes in myriad ways, presupposing that a benchmark nature can indeed be recreated amidst this biophysical transformation, and (2) there is limited sensitivity to the uncertainty and unpredictability characterising the processes of global environmental change (Ellis, 2015; Head, 2011).

The Anthropocene provides a useful provocation for de-centering conservation biology by advancing a cross-disciplinary discussion about future environmental management in ways that resonate for rural-amenity landscapes. While the hallmarks of the Anthropocene that signify the end of the Holocene era continue to be debated by geologists and environmental scientists, its conclusion is said to mark the phase in which earth systems have become largely overwhelmed by human activity (Lalasz et al., 2011). If the natural world has been consigned to the now departed Holocene, the Anthropocene requires us to de-centre traditional ecological benchmarks as the reference point for environmental management, reflecting instead that ecologies are emergent products of human–environment interaction (Castree, 2014; Head et al., 2015; Lorimer and Driessen, 2014; Robbins and Moore, 2013). Such a conception is particularly relevant for rural-amenity landscapes, given the often complex and multiple successions of landscape modification and habitation they embody.

While a framing of rural-amenity ecologies as emergent helps us to de-centre traditional notions of conservation biology, key questions remain: (1) In what specific ways are ecologies produced through human–environment interaction in rural-amenity landscapes, and; (2) what are the implications for environmental management theory and practice in heavily modified landscapes?

3. Temporality, nonhuman agency and environmental management practice

We argue that the tangible and intimate interactions between people and the environments in which they live are an essential starting point for interrogating rural-amenity ecologies in the Anthropocene. As Halfacree (2006, p309) notes, ‘relationships between land and everyday life’ are critical in the making and re-making of rural landscapes over time. However, the ecological implications discourse has so far progressed with limited attention to the tangible relationships between amenity migrants and the landscapes they inhabit (for a notable exception see Gill et al.,

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