



# Moving the amenity migration literature forward: Understanding community-level factors associated with positive outcomes after amenity-driven change



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 12 February 2016  
Received in revised form  
24 April 2017  
Accepted 1 May 2017  
Available online 6 May 2017

### Keywords:

Amenity migration  
Impacts of migration  
Community development  
Costa Rica

## ABSTRACT

The amenity migration literature has been growing for close to four decades, paying specific emphasis to the causes and consequences of this phenomenon, characterizing and understanding the amenity migrants, and contrasting them to their counterparts. While these major topics have provided key contributions to the understanding of amenity migration, the literature lacks deeper knowledge of the factors that can lead to positive outcomes after such phenomenon. Particularly lacking are studies examining community-level processes that can help find ways to address the impacts associated with amenity migration. This study intends to move the literature on amenity migration forward by examining community-level factors associated with positive responses to the challenges posed by this phenomenon. By comparing two Costa Rican communities experiencing amenity migration, we respond to the question: What community factors lead to positive outcomes after experiencing amenity migration? The study found that the way the community feels about change and migrants, migrants' perceived roles in the local economy, the relation between locals and migrants, and the existence/establishment of community development efforts are critical factors for positive outcomes.

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of amenity migration refers to population movement towards natural amenity-rich rural communities, a phenomenon that has been prominent in many parts of the world in the last four decades (Moss, 2006; Moss and Glorioso, 2014). Academics researching this phenomenon have studied its causes and consequences, characterized amenity migrants, and contrasted them to the local population. Such body of literature has provided a wealth of knowledge that has contributed to the understanding of different aspects of this phenomenon.

However, the literature is in a place where it needs to move forward by producing knowledge that can inform how the diverse implications of this phenomenon (see Moss, 2006; Guimond and Simard, 2010; Gosnell and Abrams, 2011; Glorioso, 2014; Hayes, 2015; Winkler, 2013) can be addressed. We believe one way of doing this is by focusing on community-level studies that holistically examine the community, its actors, and their relationships in

the context of the changes brought by amenity migration.

Thus, beyond characterizations and identification of the causes and consequences of amenity migration, this study intends to move the literature forward by uncovering community-level factors that are associated with positive responses to the changes generated by such phenomenon. The purpose of this study then is to better understand, from a sociological perspective, some of the factors that contribute to overall positive outcomes in communities undergoing amenity migration. The study responds to the question: What community factors lead to positive outcomes after experiencing amenity migration?

To answer to this question, the two Costa Rican rural communities of Nuevo Arenal and Bahia Ballena were studied and compared. These communities were chosen based on their self-reported contrasting experiences with amenity migration. Nuevo Arenal residents reported overall positive community outcomes after the arrival of amenity migrants while Bahia Ballena residents reported a less optimistic view.

The manuscript is structured as follows. First, a literature review on amenity migration is offered. Then, the methods section describes site selection, data collection, and data analysis techniques

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used. The findings section shares the results discussed in the context of the larger literature. Finally, a conclusion section provides the overarching inferences stemming from the study.

## 2. Amenity migration

Many rural areas around the world, particularly those rich in natural amenities (McGranahan, 1999), have been experiencing dramatic changes resulting from the influx of urbanites. Initial studies of this phenomenon focused on understanding its causes, finding that changing societal conditions occurring at multiple levels have facilitated the movement of people to those communities (Beale, 1975; Tucker, 1976; Wardwell and Brown, 1980). From the “demand” side, changes in workforce conditions and values; improvements in telecommunication and transportation; trans-generational transfer of wealth; and increased adoption of lifestyle choices, including those associated with leisure, tourism and quality of life standards, have affected people's life choices that break “traditional” patterns (Beyers and Nelson, 2000; Gosnell and Abrams, 2011; Krannich et al., 2011). From the “supply” side, improvements in postal services and rural electrification, the surfacing of roads, spreading of motor vehicle ownership among farm and small-town residents, and the introduction of radio, television, and more recently broad band internet, have been preparing rural areas for a broader development (Hawley and Mills, 1981). Additionally, the continual loss in dependency of the rural economy on traditional extractive industries and agriculture has resulted in alternative post-productivist uses of the rural land, including its commodification as lifestyle amenities (Guimond and Simard, 2010; Gosnell and Abrams, 2011; Mitchell, 2004).

Altogether, these conditions have allowed individuals to make choices about their lives, which in general terms reflect a conscious desire to migrate to other localities following particular life goals and aspirations. Distinct from economic necessity or forced relocations (e.g., human conflict or natural disasters), this type of migration is driven by choices that people *want* to make, motivated by a desire and ability to relocate in a search for specific life conditions, which are, in this case, found in rural areas (Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2015; Ruiz-Ballesteros and Cáceres-Feria, 2016).

The literature has also focused on characterizing the amenity migrant, departing from the motivations that he/she had for migrating. Two of the most popular concepts used for explaining this phenomenon are lifestyle and amenity migration. Benson (2009) argues that lifestyle migration provides a larger net that encompasses this migratory phenomenon. Generally speaking, lifestyle migration describes “the relocation of people from the developed world searching for a better way of life” (Benson, 2009, p. 608). Matarrita-Cascante et al. (2015) noted that migrants move:

... with the objective of merging their motivations (e.g., escape from personal and/or social burdens of their current life, the search for a slower pace of life, lower cost of living, better climate, desire to live closer to nature) with the characteristics and conditions offered by their new location of residence (e.g., rurality, natural amenities, coastal retreat, leisure amenities, outdoor living, exotic food and cultural elements, alternative lifestyles) (p.2).

The amenity migration literature, strongly rooted in studies conducted predominantly in North America (Moss, 2006; Abrams et al., 2012), has focused on migrants who are moving from urban to rural areas *primarily* seeking natural amenities (McGranahan, 1999; Moss, 2006; Moss and Glorioso, 2014). That is, the amenity migrant is less concerned with “urban amenities” and lifestyle choices, but is particularly motivated by the natural environment

and associated experiences (e.g. outdoor recreation, leisure) found in natural amenity-rich rural areas (Beyers and Nelson, 2000; Buller and Hoggart, 1994; McGranahan, 1999; Moss, 2006).

This literature has also paid attention to the migrant by characterizing him/her, finding that they do not belong to a homogeneous group. There is significant variability with regards to their origins, length of stay, and their type of stay. In terms of their origin, amenity migrants can be domestic or international. The former group consists of individuals who seek rural natural amenity-rich areas as a new life destination within their own country. The latter, also known as transnational amenity migrants (the focus of this study), is represented by individuals, oftentimes from developed countries, who move to other countries (on many occasions underdeveloped ones) seeking proximity to natural amenities (Abrams et al., 2012; Moss, 2006). In terms of their length of stay, some migrants move to rural natural amenity-rich areas seasonally, as in the case of second homeowners (also known as seasonal, cottage, and occasional use residents; Marcouiller et al., 2013). This type of migrant maintains ownership of multiple dwellings and is highly mobile between residences (McIntyre et al., 2006; Marcouiller et al., 2013). Others migrate permanently, surrendering residence elsewhere. In contrast to seasonal residents, permanent migrants are less mobile and establish a new life in their new community. Finally, characterizations of migrants by type of stay clarify that some amenity migrants do not engage in any type of formal employment, as they have established ways of securing their income elsewhere (e.g., retirement funds, existing businesses). Other migrants, on the other hand, require a way to secure an income, resulting in remote employment using technology to work from afar, establishing businesses, or seeking jobs in their new rural natural amenity-rich community (Cortés et al., 2014; Van Noorloos, 2013). Along this line, the literature tends to focus on the entrepreneurial migrant, applauding the contribution that they bring to the economic and human “stock” of amenity-rich communities (Zebryte and Ruiz, 2014; Zunino et al., 2016; Zunino et al., 2014).

Other studies have focused on contrasting migrants with the rural local population. Initial studies along this line compared the sociodemographic characteristics of these two groups, finding that migrants oftentimes display higher levels of income and education than their counterparts (Clendenning et al., 2005; Krannich et al., 2011; Moss and Glorioso, 2014; Schewe et al., 2012). Studies have also contrasted their cultural characteristics, reflected in different attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors. These include religious and political beliefs; levels of attachment and involvement in local affairs; environmental attitudes and behaviors; and opinions regarding local development routes/strategies (Clendenning et al., 2005; Green et al., 1996; Jobs, 2000; Jones et al., 2003; Lynch, 2006; Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2006; Kondo et al., 2012; Jennings and Krannich, 2013; Matarrita-Cascante and Stocks, 2013; Van Noorloos, 2013). Studies contrasting migrants and rural residents have also examined the ways in which these two groups relate. Findings along this line of research are mixed, noting how members of both groups on instances clash, interact in mundane ways, or integrate (Graber, 1974; Smith and Krannich, 2000; Van Noorloos, 2013; Matarrita-Cascante and Stocks, 2013).

Another broad research line studies how their amenity migrant presence in rural amenity-rich communities generates a large number of modifications to the rural social, economic, and physical landscape (Guimond and Simard, 2010; Abrams et al., 2012; Gosnell and Abrams, 2011; Moss and Glorioso, 2014; Schewe et al., 2012; Winkler, 2013). Cortés et al. (2014, p. 508) summarized some of the impacts of amenity migration, stating that this phenomenon has an effect on:

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