



The end of the idyll? Post-crisis conservation and amenity migration in natural protected areas



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ABSTRACT

The 2008 economic crisis and the introduction of austerity policies and values after the crisis are transforming the management of natural protected areas in the global North. Communities of amenity migrants living in these areas have been impacted by such issues as budgetary cuts and state disinvestments in conservation. Important threats to their expectations of an alternative life in a natural idyll are changing the attitudes of amenity migrants towards conservation and rural regions. In this paper, I analyse the main changes in their livelihood and lifestyles in two different natural parks in Spain. The main goal of this analysis is to stimulate a debate about the social impacts of new conservation strategies in the post-crisis context, with particular attention to multi-functional, post-productive rural spaces such as amenity destinations.

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1. Introduction

The regime of economic austerity introduced in many countries in the global North since the 2008 financial crisis is transforming environmental policies and natural resource governance. This is particularly evident in European natural protected areas. Reduction of public funding, state disinvestments in conservation, proliferation of market-based conservation strategies, and institutional rearrangements are bringing profound changes to the management of these areas amidst a scenario characterised by widespread economic uncertainty and growing unemployment (Apostolopoulou et al., 2014; Hodge and Adams, 2014; Apostolopoulou and Adams, 2015).

These changes are having a considerable impact on the lives and livelihoods of amenity migrants, who at present constitute one of the principal communities in natural protected areas in the global North. Amenity migration, characterized by a move from cities to rural areas in search of a higher quality of life (Moss, 2006; Abrams et al., 2012), has become a relatively common phenomenon since the 1970's.² Because amenity migrants are driven by the desire and

expectation of a more relaxed and carefree life closer to natural and cultural amenities, rather than in response to economic or political drivers (Gosnell and Abrams, 2010), it is usually considered a form of lifestyle migration (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009).

This paper examines how the re-entrenchment of neoliberal practices of natural resource governance in the post-crisis context, notably in the form of state disinvestments in conservation, interacts with ever-increasing economic constraints to generate important impacts on the lifestyles of different communities of amenity migrants in two natural parks in the south of Spain. The study focuses on the outcomes of current changes in park management such as budgetary cuts to conservation practices, loss of conservation jobs in environmental education and park maintenance, and cancelation of state incentives to environmentally-friendly activities such as ecotourism amidst a context of changing patterns in this sector that is causing decreasing incomes and growing competition between ecotourism companies and between workers.

My analysis approaches the social impacts of post-crisis conservation on amenity migrants from the point of view of their lifestyles, for two interrelated reasons. First, amenity lifestyle is a project, a search for an alternative life, not merely the result of a move from the city to the countryside, and as such it depends on the production of 'rural idylls' (Halfacree and Rivera, 2011). It is therefore inextricably intertwined with the shifts in regimes of production and consumption that were brought forth by the introduction of conservation policies in many rural areas of Europe

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² Issues of amenity migration can be also found in such geographical contexts as Latin America, although the bulk of case studies refer to European and North American contexts (see Abrams et al., 2012 for a review).

and North America over the last few decades (Hines, 2010, 2012). Secondly, far from naturally endowed, 'lifestyle' is the product of specific conditions of existence within a particular social space (Bourdieu, 1984), which in turn are defined by the holdings of economic, cultural and symbolic capital in ways that determine practices, cultural dispositions and power relations. As such, the analysis of amenity lifestyles can provide a nuanced description of the social space of natural protected areas, which in turn can help us understand how these regions are changing in the post-crisis context.

My focus is on amenity migrant communities in two natural protected areas in Spain: the *Cabo de Gata-Níjar* natural park and *Sierra de Aracena y Picos de Aroche* natural park. I present empirical evidence drawn from several years of qualitative ethnographic research, both before and after the 2008 economic crisis, and which points at changes in amenity lifestyles that can be directly connected to new conservation strategies in the post-crisis context. In doing so, my main aim is to show how these conservation models, strongly influenced by the expansion of the neoliberal ideology, transform the social space of the kind of multi-functional, post-productive rural spaces that amenity destinations, such as natural protected areas, symbolise nowadays.

My analysis demonstrates that: a) the motivation to live closer to natural and cultural amenities underpins the relation between amenity migrants and protected areas, conservation policies and such new economic activities as ecotourism; and b) in the current post-crisis context, which is characterised both by economic uncertainty and state disinvestments in conservation, the expectations of an alternative lifestyle played out in a natural idyll become increasingly threatened, generating a sense of disappointment with amenity living as well as more critical attitudes toward conservation. Therefore, one of my key findings is that - in addition to their other possible impacts on income, land access, and household assets - austerity conservation and the economic crisis are generating a profound transformation of lifestyles. The analysis of such transformations, I will argue, is essential to understanding new trends in the relation between diverse rural communities, natural protected areas, and conservation governance in the global North.

2. Amenity lifestyles, conservation and neoliberalism

The phenomenon of amenity migration has multiple roots. Abrams et al. (2012) define it as the movement of urban or suburban populations to rural areas for specific lifestyle amenities, such as 'natural scenery, proximity to outdoor recreation, cultural richness, or a sense of rurality' (2012: 270). It is a movement to escape the perceived nuisances and burdens of urban life, itself a characteristic of post-materialist, reflexive societies in economically developed countries since the 1970s (Nogue, 1988; Figueiredo, 2008; Mahon et al., 2012). Furthermore, the entire amenity experience is also characteristically guided and structured by a wish to maximise the amount of time available for leisure and recreational activities (Moss, 2006).

This phenomenon emerged amidst the over-productive agricultural policies that emptied rural localities of their agricultural labour in Europe and North America during the second half of the 20th century. It developed together with the re-orientation of some of these areas from production to consumption and the emergence of so-called multi-functional countrysides (Coca, 2008; Andersson et al., 2009; Mitchell and Randle, 2014). Amenity migration is therefore part and parcel of the key physical, cultural, demographic, and political transformations that many of these rural areas have recently experienced, and which also include deagrarianisation, economic diversification and the growth of tourism (Murdoch et al., 2003; Mitchell, 2004; Silva and Figueiredo, 2013).

The relation between amenity migrants and rural locations hinges on the search for idyllic places wherein to enjoy what is perceived as a new alternative lifestyle (Swaffield and Fairweather, 1998; Moss, 2006; Halfacree, 2013). As such, amenity migration is not solely an act of moving from urban to rural locations, but also a political project that aim to transform the places of destination and re-calibrate the work-life balance with an attendant focus on quality of life (Cortes-Vazquez, 2014). These processes are in turn structurally conditioned by a number of socially constructed desires and expectations (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009; Halfacree and Rivera, 2011). The appeal of such new amenity lifestyles is connected to romanticised views of nature, wilderness, tradition and authenticity, and to attendant expectations of a non-alienated life in a healthier environment where the sense of belonging, community and attachment to nature can be nourished (Abrams et al., 2012). These links explain the strong attraction that natural protected areas exert on amenity migrants, as well as their historical support and commitment with nature conservation policies and programs. This support and commitment often feeds into the conflicts with the interests and discourses of social groups that support extractive activities and the ecological modernisation of rural locations (Jones et al., 2003; Valcuende et al., 2011; Cortes-Vazquez, 2014).

The historically-conditioned relationship between amenity migrants and conservation, however, is changing in response to the profound transformations currently unfolding within the arena of conservation and natural protected area management, themselves a product of the aftermath of the economic crisis and the re-entrenchment of the neoliberal ideology. Conservation policies across the global North are currently embedded within two simultaneous but contrasting processes. On the one hand, there is a re-entrenchment in the conflict between conservation values, development projects and economic growth amidst a deepening economic crisis and the growing importance of the extractive economies (e.g. fracking, gas projects and mining in natural protected areas in the UK, Spain, Greece, and Finland).

On the other hand, decreasing public support and funding are encouraging the search for alternative ways to fund conservation projects and to make them more attractive to big corporations and businesses. In this sense the green economy is often presented as a win-win solution to the concatenation of ecological and the economic crises. This is opening the door to the creation of new green commodities (e.g. species banking, biodiversity and carbon offsets, spectacles for ecotourism, bio-prospecting) and market-based conservation strategies, such as payments for ecosystem services (PES) (Sullivan, 2006; Fairhead et al., 2012; Corson et al., 2013; Büscher and Fletcher, 2015).

Together, these two interrelated, even if at times conflicting processes are fuelling a change of conservation model that is in a collision course with the idea of so-called post-productive and multi-functional countryside, of which amenity migration has been one constitutive element. According to the new neoliberal rationale that is becoming hegemonic, the only realistic way to 'save nature' in the context of decreasing public spending and increased pressure from ecologically-damaging initiatives is to further to measure and quantify the economic value of protected natures, introduce market-based mechanisms of governance and commodify ecosystem services. These changes come alongside a series of institutional and regulatory re-arrangements, including a diminished role of the state and bigger influence of business and industry interests, NGOs, international agencies, and civil society groups (Bücher et al., 2012).

The study of how neoliberal conservation strategies are transforming amenity lifestyles in natural protected areas is therefore strategic to understanding what kind of rural spaces these new policies are creating. Such an analysis builds on the work of several

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