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Do trees make people more rooted? Private forest owners' migration behaviour

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ABSTRACT

Forestland is a tangible asset, likely both indicating and creating attachment to the forest site for the owners. Forest ownership can both create and maintain a strong motive for developing the forest holding and its surroundings. Decisions made by non-industrial private forest (NIPF) owners can therefore be expected to influence population development in the local communities. This paper addresses forest owners' migration propensity, and whether forest ownership influences migration to and from the municipality where the forest holding is located. Comparing the non-forest owners to the group of local NIPF owners, we found that the latter are more sedentary. Forest owners living in their forest municipalities seldom move out – about a third annually compared to others in the same age group. When moving, about half of absentee forest owners select their forest municipality as their destination and thus become local forest owners. Although private forest ownership significantly contributes to population development in small, remote rural municipalities, policies for local and rural development rarely acknowledge the potential private forest owners represent for economic and population development in rural areas.

1. Introduction

Owning land and natural resources entails a certain influence over the local economy and development in the community where the land is located. All such ownership of localized resources might create rootedness among private owners. This study focuses on private ownership of forest land, a major natural resource in Sweden covering more than half of the land surface. Decisions on when and where to plant, thin or harvest affect the landscape and the recreation possibilities for the local population as well as tourists, and can yield job opportunities for local residents and thereby tax revenue. Forest ownership can also have a positive effect on entrepreneurship, as forest properties offer access to various resources that can offer an advantage to a firm (Haugen and Lindgren, 2013; Ní Dhubáin et al., 2007). The decisions taken by non-industrial private forest (NIPF) owners also affect the economy on a national level. NIPF owners own around 40% of forest area in Europe, varying from 10% in Bulgaria, for instance, to 50% in Sweden and almost 100% in Portugal (Pulla et al., 2013). While forest management is controlled through the institutional framework of national laws and policies, the landowners exercise power within these boundaries through their decisions on matters such as selecting who actually performs forest measures, when, where and how to harvest and how to use the proceeds. Management of forests, and ultimately of the goods and services they produce, is to a great extent a matter for 16 million NIPF owners – corresponding to 3% of the population in the EU27 (European Commission, 2013).

A forest is a localized resource that stays where it is, while its owner can migrate. Migrating from the holding can result in the sale of the holding, or in the NIPF owner (referred to as forest owner from this point on) keeping the holding and thereby becoming an absentee owner. An owned piece of forestland is a tangible asset and a commitment, likely both indicating and creating attachment to the forest site – for both local owners living on or close to the property as well as absentee owners. Forest ownership creates and maintains an important motive for developing the forest place and its surroundings. Indeed, for local forest owners, the value of a place to live and of having fuelwood is perceived to be important. Further, local as well as absentee owners perceive social values, such as maintaining a forestry tradition and contact with family and friends, to be as important as economic revenues (Nordlund and Westin, 2011).

This opens up for the question of whether forest ownership reduces the negative population development in rural forest communities. The aim of this study is to investigate the extent to which private forest ownership affects migration flows. Two specific questions are addressed:

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- Does forest ownership affect migration from the municipalities where the forest holdings are located? Does owning a forest where you live have a retaining effect?
- Does forest ownership affect migration to the municipalities where the forest holdings are located? Are forest owners more likely to migrate to the municipality where their forest is located compared to non-forest owners?

The empirical case is Sweden, which has 336,000 forest owners. Of these, close to 40% are women, the average age is 58 years, and 28% are absentee forest owners (Haugen et al., 2016).

2. Previous studies

2.1. Motives for forest ownership

Changing characteristics of forest owners – for example increasing numbers of female owners, increasing numbers of absentee owners, and owners' diminished economic dependence on forestry – have altered the reasons for forest ownership and management strategies (e.g. Weiss et al., 2018; Westin et al., 2017; Kvarda, 2004). Environmental aspects – biodiversity, preservation of virgin forests, animals and plants, etc. – are stressed in EU guidelines as well as in the individual member states' forest policies (European Commission, 2013). Such environmental forest values are also present among many forest owners, particularly those in Western Europe. These owners consider ecosystem orientation more important than those in Eastern Europe, who emphasize economic aspects and forest maintenance (Feliciano et al., 2017; Põllumäe et al., 2014). Owners whose main objective is production are more oriented towards generating economic activities, while those whose main objective is consumption of wood or non-wood products stress the importance of personal use (Ní Dhubáin et al., 2007). Further, local forest owners assign more importance to timber production, while absentee owners rate environmental aspects higher than local owners do (Nordlund and Westin, 2011). Another divide in socio-economic characteristics, ownership motives, and behaviour goes between new and persistent owners (Côté et al., 2017; Kendra and Hull, 2005). The former have a higher education level, a higher income, and the new owners live further away from their holding than persistent owners do. As the new owners are not dependent on forest incomes, they are more interested in "the pleasures they derive from their forests than long-standing owners, who are more likely to want to maximize the income from their land" (Côté et al., 2017:120). However, despite different motives for ownership, the new owners visit their holdings just as often as persistent owners do (ibid).

A recent trend noted in, for instance, the US is urban people buying residential properties beyond the metropolitan fringe, with some of these properties including forest. Thus, a group of forest owners is emerging whose primary reason for forest ownership is to acquire a place of residence. There is also evidence that some leave the urban environment in favour of living on their forest holding. For these exurban movers, owning forest is motivated by more lifestyle-oriented aspects such as privacy, protecting nature, personal identity, and preserving family traditions, objectives they perceive as more important than timber production and economic concerns (Kendra and Hull, 2005).

Industry and policymakers, as well as forest owners, play a pivotal role in providing ecosystem services, supplying wood and other goods and services. Several typologies have been developed in order to understand, and predict, forest owners' behaviour (see for example overview in Ficko et al., 2017). The focuses of these typologies differ. Those based on forest owners' socio-demographic characteristics are useful in examining how ownership changes over time and between regions (ibid.), while classifying owners' attitudes, values, beliefs, objectives and motivations can be used to examine involvement in forest management (e.g. Feliciano et al., 2017).

The role of forests in rural development and for the local economy has been discussed within different disciplines (e.g. Elands and Wiersum, 2001; European Commission, 1997; Feliciano et al., 2017; Crowley et al., 2001). Not only has the definition of rural development been debated; so has the forest's role in contributing to rural development. Literature specifically focusing on entrepreneur forest owners is rather scarce, though, and unsurprisingly mainly focuses on forest-related activities (e.g. Lindroos et al., 2005; Ní Dhubáin et al., 2007). However, forest owners do not necessarily direct their entrepreneurship efforts towards activities in the primary sector. A Norwegian study found that, among forest owners who had started firms, the most common business activities were either 'commercialization of hunting and fishing' or renting out accommodation (cabins), i.e. tourism (cf. Eikeland and Lie, 1999; Lunnan et al., 2006: 686). A study of Swedish forest owners concluded that forest assets had a positive influence on firm performance (Haugen and Lindgren, 2013). Hence, forest owners' business ventures may include a substantial share of other activities beneficial to the local economy, and therefore promote rural development.

2.2. Migration motives

Migration has changed over time, as have the approaches to understanding it. In neoclassical economic theorie, it was assumed that migration was economically driven, with the mover expecting to benefit economically from migrating (e.g. Lee, 1966; Sjaastad, 1962). Different push factors (e.g. poverty, unemployment, political instability), and pull factors (e.g. job opportunities, thriving economies) could explain migration. Later, social motives related to major changes or events in people's lives, such as marrying, having children, nest-leaving and entering the education or labour market, as well as retirement, have been added to the more economic drivers (e.g. Fischer and Malmberg, 2001). A study based on internal movers in the Nordic countries showed that social motives, such as moving in with or separating from a partner, and moving closer to relatives and friends, were the most frequent motives, and that the importance of these motives increased with age (Garvill et al., 2004).

Return migration, i.e. moving back to a place where one has previously lived, is not uncommon. Studies from different countries, including Sweden, estimate that around a fourth of all internal movers are return movers (e.g. Niedomysl and Amcoff, 2011). Lundholm (2012) argues that counter-urbanization towards the peripheral rural areas is driven by return migration. Special interest can be directed towards later-life movers, the growing cohort that will soon enter retirement. The retirees-to-be in this study grew up in the 1960s, and many were urbanizers and have links to the rural areas they migrated from. In fact, counter-urban migration is typical among those in this cohort who migrate (ibid.). Less is known of the extent to which such a desire to return to one's specific former place of residence also spills over into a preference for moving to other rural places of the same kind, but might be significant when combined with the existence of certain amenities like owned forest at the similar destination.

Müller and Marjavaara (2011) studied another form of rural migration and found that, although migration to second homes in Sweden is marginal in relation to total migration, it still amounts to 11,000 individuals per year. For some areas, this can be a substantial inflow and contribution to the local economy. Most of these second-home movers are either in their late 20s or mid-50s, though a non-negligible number of people move even after retirement (ibid.). Geographically, most of these second homes are found along the coastline and at ski resorts. A not insignificant number of them are also found in the forest-rich rural inland of Sweden, where depopulation is of great concern. Part of the stock of second homes comprises transformed former permanent residences that were left in the 1950s and 60s, when the agricultural sector underwent structural changes (Müller, 2006).

A person's relationship to his or her forest holding can go beyond