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Vulnerability of fishing communities undergoing gentrification

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ABSTRACT

Maine hosts numerous rural fishing villages that contribute greatly to the State's economy and culture. The cumulative effects of fisheries regulation, stock depletion, amenity migration and rural restructuring have impacted these communities in complex ways. Drawing on ethnographic research, interviews, and secondary data we have identified the patterns of change as symptomatic of gentrification, and we have investigated how these changes are affecting the communities' vulnerability and resilience. Gentrification of coastal property by amenity migrants is responsible for the displacement of community members, including fishermen. The loss-of-access to the waterfront has increased their sensitivity to future threats. Further changes in the demographics and economies of the communities have increased social and cultural conflicts. Nevertheless, this paper also demonstrates that gentrification can increase the resilience of the community. Amenity migrants have the capacity and desire to provide social and philanthropic support, and rural restructuring introduces new economic opportunities and sources of revenue. The underlying consequences of gentrification are difficult to discern from secondary data alone, and we argue that the ethnographic approach is crucial. Through interview responses we have identified an identity crisis in these communities undergoing gentrification, with many of the conflicts over the future importance of fishing to the community.

1. Introduction

1.1. Vulnerability of fishing communities

In the United States, federal fisheries legislation, known as the Magnusson Stevens Act, requires fisheries managers to consider the socio-economic consequences of regulations on fishing dependent communities, and to minimize those impacts when possible (Clay, 2007). While the mandate is laudable, its implementation has been hampered by the amorphous definition of a fishing community and the cumulative impacts a community faces (Clay, 2007), including gentrification (Gale, 1991; Hall-Arber et al., 2001). In response, workers have turned to the interdisciplinary field of "vulnerability" research to evaluate communities impacted by fishing regulations while those communities undergo social, and ecological changes (Clay and Olson, 2008).

Broadly defined by Kasperson et al. (2001) vulnerability is the "differential susceptibility to loss from a given insult". The concept of vulnerability has multiple dimensions, which are often interrelated and inter-dependent, but for simplicity they can be separated into three key components to aid in analysis: the degree of exposure to a threat, sensitivity to that threat, and resilience to perturbations (Tuler et al., 2008). A hazard, or insult, which threatens to harm people or the things they value may originate from the natural environment or from interactions with people, and can also originate outside the community. Exposure refers to the degree that people or a place is likely to experience a threat from a given hazard, and involves an evaluation of the spatial or temporal scale of the hazard, and whether it is a singular, repeating, or chronic perturbation (Turner et al., 2003). Sensitivity refers to the diverse socio-economic and other characteristics of people and places that affect how they will be impacted if exposed to a threat. Finally, resilience refers to the ability of the subject to respond to the hazard. Although, resilience is usually regarded as being opposed to vulnerability, the concept is more concerned with the recovery from the stress and the adaptations made to better handle similar threats in the future (Johnson et al., 2014).

A number of studies have focused on assessing vulnerability or

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resilience in fishing communities (Johnson et al., 2014; Tuler et al., 2008; Marshall and Marshall, 2007; Henry and Johnson, 2015). Among the processes affecting the vulnerability of fishing dependent communities, gentrification has been recognized as a key element with the potential to displace fishermen and hinder access to the waterfront (Gale, 1991; Hall-Arber et al., 2001). Although, its impact on communities remains difficult to evaluate, gentrification has been incorporated into vulnerability assessments as part of efforts to meet federal mandates for social impact assessments (Jacob et al., 2010a, b; Colburn and Jepson, 2012). Hall-Arber et al. (2001) modeled gentrification using a scale that used sixteen principle components. Jacob et al. (2010a, b) assessed gentrification in fishing communities through quantitative social indicators and implied that it increases the sensitivity of communities. Similarly, Colburn and Jepson (2012) identified gentrification in fishing communities by creating indexes derived from U.S. census data, the strength of which signaled whether or not it was occurring.

In the research presented here, we adopted a qualitative, ethnographic research approach to investigate gentrification that emerged from a larger study focused on understanding vulnerability in fishing dependent communities. In that study, qualitative data gathered from the numerous interviews and oral histories facilitated an understanding of resilience that went beyond what could be captured by secondary data analysis (Johnson et al., 2014), and we found the same to be true for gentrification. In particular, our findings rely upon the ethnographic approach's ability to penetrate to the core of an issue. While the focus of the larger project focused on the fishing dependent communities, to understand gentrification, we found it necessary to extend our analysis beyond the fishing industry to the broader community and landscape. This wider perspective was necessary to organize the data on patterns of change into themes and identify how they were or were not related to the process of gentrification. Once the patterns of socioeconomic change and conflict were identified through the research, we then analyzed it using the vulnerability framework and through the lens of gentrification. Our findings indicate that with respect to vulnerability, gentrification is a complex process that can both contribute to and mitigate vulnerability in fishing communities. Before describing our methods and findings, we begin with an examination of gentrification literature, including the closely related subject of amenity migration.

1.2. Gentrification and amenity migration

Gentrification studies in the urban environment typically follow one of two theories that describe the process as either being driven by economic or social forces. The economic geographer, Neil Smith, observed how urban neighborhoods deteriorated over long periods of time due to neglect and disinvestment, and at a certain point attracted new buyers who gentrified the neighborhood. According to Smith's (1979) economic theory, the difference between the low cost of the property and the potential for its 'best use' is responsible for creating a rent gap, spurring capital investment. Neil Smith's rent gap was pivotal in explaining the necessary economic conditions for gentrification to occur, but it could not account for the individual preferences behind why gentrification occurred (Lees et al., 2008). Alternatively, the human geographer David Ley (1980) proposed that broad societal changes and the creation of a new middle class is responsible for gentrification, which results from the desire to consume a lifestyle of cultural amenities and aesthetics provided by the urban environment. As reviewed by Lees et al. (2008), the explanations for gentrification have broadened to include both theories and researchers have adapted the theory to many scenarios and landscapes including “rural gentrification”.

The patterns of change resulting from gentrification are reminiscent of those described in amenity migration literature, and their underlying theories are similar. Thus, we utilize amenity migration literature to guide our investigation of gentrification in an under studied location, coastal fishing communities. Amenity migration and the closely affiliated study of rural restructuring have been extensively researched and cover topics such as motives, social consequences, and economic implications (Gosnell and Abrams, 2011). Although there is no strict consensus, the description of amenity migration involves the movement of people due to the draw of natural or cultural amenities. McCarthy (2008) broadly defines amenity migration as “the purchasing of primary or secondary residences in rural area valued for their aesthetic, recreational, and other consumption-oriented use values”. In rural gentrification literature, migration out of cities is explained by several counter-culture motivations and the desire to consume a broad swath of idealized rural life (Lees et al., 2008). The definitions are analogous and amenity migration research will occasionally cite rural gentrification literature when referencing 'pull factors' that motivate migrants (Gosnell and Abrams, 2011). While both rural gentrification and amenity migration literature note the importance of the ‘Rural Idyll’ in describing the pattern of migration and development, the natural aesthetics are emphasized in Amenity migration literature (McCarthy, 2008; Gosnell and Abrams 2011). Scholars also recognize that these development patterns are driven by the globalization of the rural landscape, which occurs when urban professionals with capital relocate to high-amenity destinations (McCarthy, 2008; Gosnell and Abrams, 2011; Nelson, 2005; Nelson and Nelson, 2010). Exurban landscapes are created through the same process, but have closer ties to metropolitan labor markets and transportation systems (McCarthy, 2008). In their review, Gosnell and Abrams (2011) note that Amenity Migration research is dispersed throughout a diverse literature and the phenomena has long been recognized. Although a concise and comprehensive theory is elusive, amenity migration literature is useful for describing the social, economic, and political impacts on rural communities (Nelson and Nelson, 2010).

Often coinciding with amenity migration is the rural restructuring of the landscape through which traditional uses of property yield to a growing service sector. Amenity migration and rural restructuring have further implications for the local economy and communities, some of which may be desirable, but are nevertheless disruptive. Typically, migrants are wealthier than local residents who may still derive a livelihood from traditional occupations. This importation of wealth can support local economies through increased demand for services and may lead to job growth (Nelson, 2001). Thus, rural restructuring results in a new type of economy based on retail and services, but these new employment opportunities often pay relatively low wages. While economic wellbeing increases, social wellbeing decreases through greater income inequality (Ohman, 1999). The transition also features an increased cost of living due to amenity migrants purchasing homes and raising property values. Combined with the lack of economic opportunity for locals, this situation leads to the displacement of residents who can no long afford to live there (Nelson, 2001). Furthermore, studies on amenity migration reveal an increased awareness of class divisions, the disintegration of community identity, a shift from productive to consumptive activities, and an alteration of traditional human–land interactions (Nelson, 2001; Bell, 1992, 2007). The resulting transition can increase conflicts and disrupt the communities in a number of ways (Gosnell and Abrams, 2011; Yung and Belsky, 2007).

2. Methods and study site

2.1. Ethnographic approach

This paper draws on ethnographic research conducted from