Sociocultural change facing ranchers in the Rocky Mountain West as a result of mountain resort tourism and amenity migration

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ABSTRACT

In response to rural restructuring, many communities throughout the Rocky Mountain West have shifted from extractive and land-intensive industries to service-based economies, contributing to significant socio-cultural change for local residents, including ranchers. This exploratory study uses social capital as a heuristic device to examine ranchers' perspectives on the way in which mountain resort tourism and amenity migration have affected their patterns of socialization in the ranchlands surrounding Steamboat Springs, Colorado. Findings indicate the importance of both formal and informal bonding and bridging networks within the ranching community. While the introduction of amenity migrants and their differing perceptions on land ownership and management appear to have affected opportunities for informal rancher social interaction, both amongst one another and with their new neighbors, they seem to have encouraged ranchers to band together to protect their livelihoods through informal collective efforts and the formal creation of bridging networks. This indicates that conflict can instigate social capital development and contribute to positive outcomes, such as empowerment and grassroots democracy. Mountain resort tourism and amenity migration therefore appear to present both opportunities and challenges that are altering the nature of rancher social interactions, but not necessarily diminishing their social capital.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the American West has experienced large-scale transition, with rapidly changing land use and migration patterns shifting its past reliance on ranching, mining, and forestry, to natural and cultural amenity-based development such as tourism and recreation (Nelson, 2001; Winkler et al., 2007). Much of this growth can be found in mountain resort communities, which attract large numbers of tourists and amenity migrants, defined as those individuals drawn to regions with outstanding natural environments, recreational opportunities, and high quality facilities and services (Glorioso and Moss, 2007). Such in-migration has dramatically transformed the economic and socio-cultural base of these communities, as they have become home to burgeoning

tourism, construction, and real estate industries (Gosnell et al., 2006). What has resulted is the transformation of the rural landscape, with rural restructuring — changes in migration patterns, technological developments and human-land relationships — leading to evolving and at times, disrupted individual and collective identities (Nelson, 2001).

Rural restructuring is not unique to rural communities in the American West (Robbins et al., 2009). What is of interest to researchers however, is how it has contributed to the shift from the "Old West" to the "New West"; regions that are "subsumed by a recreation-based and natural amenity driven economy" and characterized by rapid population growth (Winkler et al., 2007: 491). Rural restructuring has occurred against a backdrop of "tensions related to agricultural landscape change — and struggles over the identity of rural communities — taking place across the globe" (Abrams and Gosnell, 2012: 31). These changes have been ascribed to a number of factors, including declining terms of trade for agricultural produce, increasingly centralized production, the loss of employment in traditional industries, the rise of neo-liberal

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governments reducing dependency on agricultural subsidies and increasing interest by the middle class in moving from urban to rural places (Abrams and Gosnell, 2012; Larsen et al., 2007; Marsden, 1998).

Researchers have argued that the metamorphosis from the Old West to the New West has had significant effects on traditional activities, such as ranching within regions surrounding mountain resort communities (Shumway and Otterstrom, 2001). The increased desirability of these places has led to rising property values of adjacent Ranchlands, encouraging ranchers to sell and subdivide to accommodate amenity migrants (Riebsame et al., 1996; Theobald et al., 1996). These amenity migrants have brought with them new ideas regarding land ownership and management that may conflict with existing customs (Gosnell and Abrams, 2011; Yung and Belsky, 2007). This "culture clash" (Smith and Krannich, 2000), can result in tensions and conflict and a sense of "otherness" that separates amenity migrants and long-standing residents (Armstrong and Stedman, 2013).

However, clashes in values towards land use and management have arguably been overstated in some regions. While studies have shown differences in priorities regarding land management considerations such as wildlife and wildfire (Haggerty and Travis, 2006; Travis, 2007), research also indicates significant common ground between newcomers and existing residents (Nelson, 2001). Thus, as argued by Robbins et al. (2009), a more relevant focus of inquiry might be examining the processes that produce, maintain, or erode socio-cultural and economic similarities or differences among residents in what are increasingly dynamic exurban spaces. Further, a more sophisticated understanding of rural space has emerged, illustrated by Marsden's (1998: 111) observation that the growth in agricultural diversification "requires the development of new connections and networks" and Domon's (2011: 339) call for research that explores the "dynamics" that are created by "the importance of social demand for landscapes and newer forms of rural territory occupation".

This study aims to explore these issues and suggestions further by applying the concept of social capital as a heuristic device to examine rancher perspectives on the socio-cultural changes resulting from mountain resort tourism development within the ranchlands surrounding Steamboat Springs, Colorado. While social capital has increasingly been used to study socio-cultural processes of community change and development (Butler and Robson, 2001; Onyx and Bullen, 2000), its application to the field of rural restructuring is currently limited, despite its focus on complex sociological processes. The ability of social capital to identify and examine changing sociological interactions within rural landscapes undergoing restructuring should therefore be recognized.

This exploratory ethnographic study builds on research by Larsen et al. (2007) and Larsen and Hutton (2012), which explore socio-cultural values, meanings and interactions within ranching landscapes in Colorado undergoing rural restructuring. However, this research uses the shifting patterns and flows of social capital as a lens for examining socio-cultural processes, as compared to explaining differing norms, attitudes towards local governance, and socio-economic status in an "old" versus "new" framework. The aim is to facilitate a better understanding of rancher perspectives on socio-cultural changes brought about by tourism.

It is important to note that tourism is not the sole contributor to socio-cultural change within the ranchlands of the Rocky Mountain West, with broader shifts in ranch consolidation, the transfer of ranch ownership to amenity migrants, and accompanying changes in land use for conservation, fishing or ranchette development also evident in counties without the presence of tourist resorts (Gosnell et al., 2006). Nevertheless, within the region of Routt County, mountain resort development has had significant influence over the ownership and management of ranchlands over the years, making it a useful case study of the changing dynamics of rural communities.

2. Literature review

2.1. Mountain resort tourism and ranching within the Rocky Mountain West

Within the Rocky Mountain West, the growth and development of mountain resort tourism has significantly affected ranchers in several ways. While ranching has historically been the economic mainstay for many communities, the conversion of ranchlands for tourism and real estate has dramatically increased their value, often far beyond their agricultural production value (American Farmland Trust, 2000). In particular, the desire for real estate by amenity migrants has exacerbated the rapid rise in land value, with the subsequent lack of affordable housing and rural sprawl forcing permanent residents and tourism workers to live in adjacent areas where costs of living are more affordable (Gill and Clark, 2006).

This has contributed to the subdivision of nearby ranches to meet additional housing needs, resulting in the loss of ranching operations and open space (Gosnell and Travis, 2005; Travis, 2007). Of particular concern to ranchers has been the development of "ranchettes"; luxury non-commercial ranching properties of relatively small acreage (35 acres or less) that are subdivided from larger ranches and sold as private residences (Mitchell et al., 2002). These ranchettes fragment large tracts of open ranchland (Holechek, 2001), creating a landscape matrix that includes the resort community and working ranches, surrounded by isolated residential subdivisions inhabited by permanent and semi-permanent amenity migrants.

By attracting predominantly affluent amenity migrants with their own expectations, values, and constructions of rurality, such development has brought about significant socio-cultural change for ranchers (Gosnell and Abrams, 2011). Increased numbers of amenity migrants has created a dichotomy between those who practice traditional western livelihoods and those drawn to what are perceived to be idyllic, peaceful rural landscapes (Baron et al., 2000). This can result in contested meanings of place and differing norms regarding land use and value, which may clash with the reality of everyday ranching practices and lead to neighborly conflicts and the contested use of space (Shumway and Otterstrom, 2001). In time, these issues can translate into a higher proclivity to sell, with ranchette development further encouraging the sale and subdivision of working ranches.

However, as acknowledged by Larsen et al. (2007) and Larsen and Hutton (2012), while such conventional divisions between newcomers and old timers are evident, a broader and more complex discourse of "co-opetition" can also be noted. Rather than competing with one another, these changing residents are balancing desires for independence with the periodic need for mutual support (Larsen et al., 2007). This contrasts with the previous interdependence shared by many long-time residents.

This highlights the need to further examine the socio-cultural interactions that exist among residents within regions experiencing rural restructuring, and those processes that are creating divisions or identifying underlying similarities in what are viewed as divergent populations. Additionally, given that much of the conflict discussed above is associated with land management practices between traditional ranching practices and amenity uses, knowledge of how both of these can coexist is also important. Finally, rancher socialization patterns have long played a central role in sharing knowledge on ranching operations and land management (Knapp and Fernandez-Gimenez, 2009), and informal