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(False) Dichotomies, political ideologies, and preferences for environmental management along the rural-urban interface in Calaveras County, California

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ABSTRACT

At the core of land use and governance debates in the United States are purported dualities: economy vs. environment, public goods vs. private rights, and the merits and demerits of regulation. While such dichotomies are inevitably partial, they offer a heuristic to interrogate the deeper nuances of a problem or process. I investigate these dichotomies in one site (Calaveras County, California) along the rural-urban interface (RUI). The RUI is home of some of the most valued places in contemporary society as well as some of the most challenged in terms of planning and management. Land management decisions along the RUI are complicated by social and ecological heterogeneity as well as ongoing, dynamic cultural and environmental change. Differing perspectives and shifting conditions in place influence stakeholders' views on the value and utility of a variety of resources, both environmental and social. This paper investigates how political and environmental ideologies and environmental management preferences are related in order to consider the implications of such divergent perspectives for policy and governance. Using a mixed method approach, I examine varying viewpoints related to the environment/economy dichotomy and conclude that increasing polarization of political and environmental ideals and preferences along the RUI impacts land use planning and policy as well as social, environmental, and economic outcomes. I argue that the physical and cultural landscape of the RUI is transforming and, as such, we must also (re)configure pathways for cooperation and problem solving to effectively address the challenges and contradictions of these social and ecological changes.

> If we want to change the landscape in important ways we shall have to change the ideas that have created and sustained what we see.
>
> (Scott et al. 2013: 8, citing Meinig, 1979: 42)

1. Introduction(s)

1.1. Regarding the rural-urban fringe

Those places where the "countryside meets town" are often among the most valued and pressured places and form the rural-urban fringe (Scott et al. 2013). The rural-urban fringe or interface is a messy edge that is often managed differentially by sector and at different scales by a variety of governance structures; this disintegrated policy approach (Scott et al. 2013), paired with an often contested political and social context, is framed as problematic and challenging by both practitioners and academics. Due to the multiple functions and diverse actors present in rural areas, "collisions between human demands and the capacity of rural areas to satisfy them" are inevitable and frequent (Mann & Philippe, 2009: 119). Bastian, Coatney, Mealor, Taylor, and Meiman (2014: 66) agree: "The heterogeneity of management preferences, variability in environmental knowledge levels, and related resident actions increase the likelihood of transboundary effects and policy challenges associated with exurban development".

Development along the rural fringe will face "complex and consequential interactions" between settlements, climates, and ecosystems (Mann et al., 2014: 438). This form of development dramatically increases the opportunity for interaction between human

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and "natural"[1] communities, promoting a number of environmental challenges such as ecosystem fragmentation, habitant loss, introduction of invasive species, wildlife impacts, threats to water quality and quantity, as well as increased risk and cost to society mainly due to increasing areas of wildland–urban interface and wildfire exposure. Mann et al. (2014) argue that the expansion of human settlements shape irreversible spatial and temporal patterns on the landscape, patterns and trends which can have economic, social, and environmental consequences (see also Bastian et al., 2014). Even so, little research has been done to "explore fringe belts in relation to decision makers and decision making" (Scott et al., 2013: 10).

However, the rural-urban fringe, while often plagued with planning and management challenges, also has potential as an "opportunity space", wherein its "uniqueness" breeds innovation and creativity that should not be stifled by generic, homogenizing policy prescriptions (Scott et al., 2013). As such, decisions regarding the placement and intensity of land uses and management practices must consider differing perspectives of the value and utility of ecosystem services and resources as these perspectives can vary from place to place and over time (Scott et al., 2013). Munroe, Croissant, and York (2005) agree that land use policy shapes land use patterns and outcomes and so *how* decision makers and local actors decide as well as *why* they lean a particular way is important (see also Taylor and Hurley forthcoming). Woods (2006: 580) sought to redefine the rural question, shifting the question from "rural politics" to "a politics of the rural", such that rather than focusing on "politics located in rural space" or "relating to 'rural issues'," the "politics of the rural" investigates the "meaning and regulation of rurality itself [as] the primary focus of conflict and debate." In response to these (and other) calls in the literature, this paper investigates: What values do rural residents hold and how do those values influence their land management preferences?

1.2. On dichotomies and ideologies

The government, at all scales, is challenged with a mandate to both provide environmental and other protections to the public while also defending private property rights. In the United States (US), this mandate has been handled in a variety of ways over time. The following quote from a small business owner in Calaveras County, California, is related to the challenges of governing for the common good, especially in a society with disjointed and/or contradictory perspectives on regulation and environmental management.

> A government needs to be very careful about stipulations and limitations it puts on what you can do with your own land, [but] I also feel that a government has responsibilities to make sure that all of its landowners are protected from each other because people don't police themselves well. And in a society as large as ours … I don't believe that you can expect people to police themselves well and be harmonious. I think a lot of bad things happen without land use designations, but I do think that we – a government – should be very careful about what it chooses to or how it chooses to limit property rights. I don't think it's as easy as saying the market will dictate. For instance, if you … set them so loose to where it says you can do anything you want on your property as long as it doesn't negatively affect your neighbor. Well, that's a cop out. It's a really easy thing to say but it's a very hard thing to enforce (Respondent 48, May 2010).

Respondent 48 argues that "the market will dictate" approach to land management, one favored by more conservative, property-rights minded stakeholders and decision makers, is an evasion and is ultimately ineffective.

Respondent 48's statement reveals the dualities at the core of American land use and governance debates: economy vs. environment, public goods vs. private rights, and the merits and demerits of regulation. While such dichotomies are inevitably partial, presenting only part of the picture and perhaps even clouding our perspective(s) of an inherently complex system, they offer a heuristic through which to interrogate the deeper nuances of a problem or process. Bastian et al. (2014), who also investigated perspectives of economy vs. environment, argue that understanding land owner/land managers' attitudes regarding preferencing the environment versus economy can guide educational outreach and policy making in places experiencing growth and change along the rural-urban edge. Similarly, Qviström (2010) notes that investigating the dichotomies of urban/rural and/or nature/culture can be a point of departure for understanding landscape discourses which have so often portrayed the rural-urban fringe as place of failure for planning and management. In his case, differing discourses of "rural" or "urban" (and/or nature versus culture) came to obscure the histories of use and value in place; thus Qviström argues that exposing dichotomies can aid in deconstructing them (2010).

Prudham (2005) uses the dichotomy strategy to analyze the process whereby the old-growth forest in the Douglas–fir region of the US Northwest was recast from a wasting asset to a "precious heritage" with "inherent value" and scientific and environmental utility and outlines how the "ancient forest" was revalued economically and culturally, altering its (socially-constructed) meaning (Prudham, 2005: 6). He finds that reframing the forest was not free from social, economic, or ecological turmoil. In fact, community conflict grew to a fever pitch and ultimately, the "public discourse became consumed with the perception that jobs and environment were incompatible" (Prudham, 2005: 6). The economic stakes were high and there was a drama about the court cases, protests, hearings, and summits, with the conflict "clearly pit[ting] country versus city, worker versus environmentalist, preservation versus exploitation, and nature versus culture," making the spotted owl take on a (greater) symbolic meaning and significance. In this way, the owl became a potent symbol in the *contested ecology* occurring in place, much like backyard chickens or water in the exurban Sierra Nevada of California (Hiner, accepted for publication) or the masked bobwhite in the US Southwest (Sayre, 2006).

As Prudham (2005: 6) put it: "public discourse and scholarly commentary [on the issue] focused on the apparent trade-offs between jobs and environment as a signature conflict over social and cultural values where nature is concerned." Yet, he argues that a simplistic "jobs versus environment" explanation can miss too much; rather we should seek to apprehend not just that people have different views (and perhaps try to understand what those views are), but also why different people think differently about nature (including why they are "forced" to do so), and "why we cannot all have what we want when it comes to nature" (Prudham, 2005: 7). In other words, since struggles over the meaning of nature shape and reshape environmental

[1] The legion of urban political ecologists would strongly argue that "nature" and "environment" are not separate from cities or other urban enclaves (Heynen, 2014; Keil, 2003; Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003), as would political ecologists (Robbins 2011, Zimmerer & Bassett, 2003) and human-environment geographers generally (Cadieux & Taylor, 2013; Castree, 2005; Cronon, 1992; Watts, 2005).