



# International amenity migration: Examining environmental behaviors and influences of amenity migrants and local residents in a rural community



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## ABSTRACT

This study contributes to our understanding of international amenity migration by examining the different types of environmental behaviors displayed by amenity migrants and local residents in Nuevo Arenal, Costa Rica, as well as how each group influences the other. Our findings indicate that amenity migrants and Costa Ricans displayed distinct environmental behaviors. The former group places more emphasis on large-scale processes, such as rebuilding natural ecosystems. The latter group prioritizes smaller-scale activities, such as recycling and trash collection. We also found that environmental influences in this community are unidirectional—from amenity migrants to Costa Ricans but not vice versa. Factors explaining these findings are offered.

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## 1. Introduction

Several scholars have emphasized the important role of legislation and institutional arrangements in achieving conservation goals (Agrawal, 1996; Agrawal and Gibson, 1999; Mansuri and Rao, 2004). In underdeveloped rural regions of the world, however, the role of residents in the promotion of such goals, either through their individual actions or through organized efforts, can be just as important. Given the lack of institutional ‘presence’ in many rural localities, responsible environmental practices are often left to decisions made by rural residents. Nevertheless, while such residents might have the ability to act in ways that meet conservation goals, they may not always choose to do so.

The adoption of environmental behaviors is particularly important in the context of international rural destinations rich in natural amenities (e.g., lakes, forests). Despite their ecological value, expanding human activity and settlements are encroaching on these biodiverse habitats, obstructing conservation efforts and causing social-ecological imbalances (Cincotta et al., 2000; Hetch, 2010). Natural amenity-rich localities have experienced dramatic changes in recent decades as urban dwellers increasingly seek residence in close proximity to nature (McGranahan, 1999) —a

phenomenon known as *natural amenity migration* (referred to as *amenity migration* hereafter).

As noted by Abram et al. (1998), amenity migration is not just a simple movement of people but rather a phenomenon that affects multiple dimensions of rural communities. Here, our particular emphasis is on the environmental dimensions of amenity-rich rural communities. Specifically, we seek to better understand (1) the differences in environmental behaviors displayed by amenity migrants and local rural residents (2) whether such behaviors are being shaped by the ideas and actions of the ‘other’ group of residents.

Our interest stems from two visible gaps in the literature. First, amenity migration research (in contrast to the broader category of lifestyle migration research, discussed below) has been predominantly concentrated in the global North—largely in the United States—and has focused on migration within the same country or region (Glorioso and Moss, 2007; Abrams et al., 2012; Pera, 2008). Second, within the amenity migration literature, research comparing the environmental behaviors of amenity migrants and rural residents, and the influence that these groups have on each other, is limited (Abrams et al., 2012).

Our study is timely given the increasing rate of amenity migration to the global South (Dixon et al., 2006; Emling, 2010; Janoschka, 2009; Van Noorlos, 2013). The growing incidence of international amenity migration creates a demand for research that examines the environmental consequences of this phenomenon in

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rural communities. This is particularly relevant in light of the fact that international amenity migration places individuals with drastically different backgrounds and characteristics in the same geographical location, thereby creating a new set of threats and opportunities for local ecosystems.

To achieve the study's objective, we selected the amenity-rich community of Nuevo Arenal, Costa Rica, which has experienced extensive international amenity migration since the mid-1990s. Both Costa Ricans (a.k.a. "Ticos") from Nuevo Arenal and international amenity migrants were interviewed for this study.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. International amenity migration

Amenity migration, rooted in the rural to urban migration literature (also known as the population turnaround or rural renaissance; Beale, 1982; Morrison and Wheeler, 1976), is a phenomenon also referred to as counterurbanisation, retirement migration, leisure migration, seasonal migration, and lifestyle migration (Benson, 2009; Mitchell, 2004). Benson (2009) argues that lifestyle migration is a larger umbrella term that encompasses the phenomenon described by these different terms. Generally speaking, this phenomenon describes "the relocation of people from the developed world searching for a better way of life" (Benson, 2009, p. 608). Lifestyle migration is not generally based on economic necessity, such as the search for employment or better-paying jobs (Beale, 1982; Greenwood, 1975; Wardwell and Brown, 1980), nor is it forced migration, such as that necessitated by civil unrest or natural disasters (Castles, 2003; Riad and Norris, 1996). Rather, lifestyle migration is based on choices that people want to make, motivated by a *desire* and the *ability* to relocate seasonally or permanently with the objective of merging their motivations (e.g., escape from personal and/or social burdens of their current life, the search for a slower pace of life, lower cost of living, better climate, desire to live closer to nature) with the characteristics and conditions offered by their new location of residence (e.g., rurality, natural amenities, coastal retreat, leisure amenities, outdoor living, exotic food and cultural elements, alternative lifestyles; Croucher, 2009; Benson, 2009; O'Reilly and Benson, 2009).

While the abovementioned literature seem to be referring to the same phenomenon, upon closer inspection they actually focus on different aspects of migration, resulting in differing literature. For instance, the lifestyle migration literature commonly focuses on affluent migrants relocating with the desire to access a varied number of social, cultural, and biophysical conditions as described above (Benson, 2009). Amenity migrants, however, migrate with the primary objective of being closer to natural amenities like lakes or forests (McGranahan, 1999; Matarrita-Cascante and Stocks, 2013). Additionally, the lifestyle migration literature has emerged from studies conducted in many parts of the world (Benson, 2013; Casado-Díaz et al., 2004; O'Reilly, 2000; Hayes, 2014), whereas the amenity migration literature is strongly rooted in North America (Gosnell and Abrams, 2011; Moss, 2006). Guided by our research interests (i.e., attitudes and behaviors toward natural resources and conservation) and the pressing need for research from the Global South, in this paper we will focus on amenity migration, a literature rooted on the choice to migrate in order to be closer to nature (Gosnell and Abrams, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

As noted previously, amenity migration—the movement of individuals from urban to rural areas as a result of lifestyle choices, including the desire to reside in proximity to natural amenities—is a phenomenon first (and, until recently, almost exclusively) studied in the global North, predominantly in the United States (Moss, 2006). More recently, amenity migration research conducted outside the global North has begun to emerge. The limited research in the global South has largely focused on transnational amenity migration (amenity migration from developed to underdeveloped nations); less research has been conducted on within-country amenity migration (amenity migration of residents of the same country).

Research on transnational amenity migration has illuminated a variety of negative impacts on host communities. These include substantial landscape modifications, residential segregation, displacement of local populations, symbolic appropriation (e.g., signs in other languages and with foreign depictions), conflict between foreigners and locals, increased land prices and cost of living, and increased burdens on public services (Camps et al., 2008; Janoschka, 2011; see Gosnell and Abrams, 2011 for a more exhaustive review of these impacts).

Transnational amenity migration research has also examined the features that characterize the amenity migrant, reporting a diversity of findings including variability in terms of their permanency (e.g., seasonal vs. permanent), migratory status (e.g., legal vs. illegal), and involvement in the local economy (e.g., business owners vs. retirees) (Pera, 2008; Van Noorlos, 2013). Studies have also noted diversity in the types and levels of social interaction amenity migrants have with their host community. For example, some migrants are highly interactive with local residents while others choose to live in gated communities, thus secluding themselves from the broader population (Janoschka, 2011; Pera, 2008; Van Noorlos, 2013). Studies have also reported variability in terms of the migrants' levels of involvement in their communities (Janoschka, 2009; Matarrita-Cascante and Stocks, 2013; Pera, 2008). Further, even when migrants are highly involved in community efforts, Matarrita-Cascante and Stocks (2013) and Cortes et al. (2014) suggest that cultural, economic, and linguistic differences between migrants and local residents hinder the establishment of strong personal ties and joint organizations. Such differences have also been found to interfere with locals' acceptance of migrants, as migrants are often blamed for undesired changes in values and norms of behavior (Pera, 2008).

Structural differences between international amenity migrants and local residents have also been an area of interest. Janoschka (2009, 2011) noted that amenity migrants in Costa Rica, particularly those at retirement age, were more affluent than locals. Similarly, through measuring the growth in the number, size, and price of homes in Costa Rica, Chaverri (2006) concluded that migrants have a higher income than local residents. She added that close to half of the permits approved for construction between 1995 and 2003 "were of residences with six rooms or more, confirming the tendency to construct larger housing for higher-income residents" (p. 190). However, as noted previously, there is great variability in the level of migrants' involvement in the local economy, suggesting that some might not be as affluent as commonly perceived. Much less is known regarding other structural factors.

Differences between migrants and locals are important because, as studies in the global North have shown, they are critical in defining the perceptions and behaviors of both populations (Beyers and Nelson, 2000; Matarrita-Cascante and Luloff, 2008). We believe such differences are even more pronounced in the case of the global South, where migrants and locals are culturally, and often

<sup>1</sup> Migrants who participated in this study were asked the question of why they have migrated to Costa Rica. The large majority of them specified the desire to leave close to nature as the main reason.

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