



by Gundars Rudzitis

Public Lands, Place, and Quality of Life

In the 1980s when I joined the faculty as a geographer at the University of Idaho, I saw bumper stickers that stated: “Wilderness, the land of no use.” They were part of debates about how much, if any, federal lands should be declared as federally designated wilderness in Idaho and elsewhere.

I was surprised because I had co-authored a 1982 article, “The Plight of the Parklands,” in which we documented and discussed the various threats to the national parks, the low morale of park rangers, and the increasing visitations and growing population in areas around the parks.

I decided to examine population trends in nonmetropolitan counties with or adjacent to federally designated wilderness. The logic was quite straightforward: If wilderness was “the land of no use,” there should be out-migration from such counties.

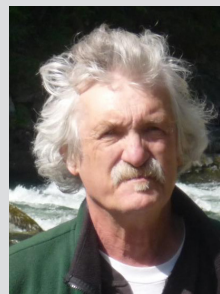
I discovered that during the 1960s, nonmetropolitan wilderness counties had population increases three times greater than other nonmetropolitan areas. In the 1970s, they grew at twice the rate of other nonmetropolitan counties. In the 1980s, wilderness-county population increased 24%—six times faster than the 4% nonmetropolitan national average and almost twice as fast as counties in the nonmetropolitan West. These trends continued in the 1990s with population growth of 30%, more than twice the U.S. metropolitan rate.

From 2000 to 2010, wilderness-county population increased by 12%, almost three times faster than the 4.5% rate of nonmetropolitan counties and slightly faster than the 10.8% rate of metropolitan counties. More specifically, population in wilderness counties in the West grew at a rate of 9% between 2000 and

2007 then declined during the Great Recession (2007 to 2011) to 3%. The impacts of the recession were greatest on the more remote rural wilderness counties which suffered a decline in population while metropolitan and adjacent wilderness counties both grew by 3%.

Wilderness counties since 2011 have rebounded with an 11% increase, more than twice that of metropolitan counties as a whole. Meanwhile, rural counties overall lost population with negative growth rates every year from 2011 until 2017.

Another indicator of the attraction of wilderness counties is that 16 of the top-20 highest-income rural counties in the West are wilderness counties. These richest wilderness counties are just one of a subset of counties ranging from those few still dominated by resource extraction to those composed of a variety of recreation and other New West characteristics. The relatively



Gundars Rudzitis, PhD, University of Chicago, is Professor Emeritus, Department of Geography, University of Idaho where he was also a Professor in Environmental Science and the Department of Philosophy.

Gundars has also taught at Boston University and the University of Texas at Austin and has been a Visiting Professor at Clark University, Harvard University, University of New Mexico, University of Waikato in New Zealand, and a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Latvia. Gundars lives on the Olympic Peninsula where he hikes year-round exploring wilderness and other public lands.

consistent growth of these wilderness counties raised the question of why people moved to them.

Why Do People Move?

A classic assumption is that people move primarily for economic reasons—that is, to increase their incomes. However, studies show that economic motivations were not the primary factors in why people moved to wilderness counties. Economic motivations accounted for about 30% of the reasons for moving. Statistical migration models also showed that economic variables explained only part of the migration into wilderness counties. Both approaches (asking people why they moved in large-scale surveys, and statistically modeling migration rates) came to similar conclusions with non-economic factors being more important. Both approaches also showed that the attractiveness or “pull” of these areas was more important than the “push” of any negative features of the areas that people were leaving.

Surveys also indicated that once they moved to wilderness counties, people were less stressed, happier, more satisfied, and became attached to the areas. And this was despite up to one-third of the migrants taking income losses or moving with no job waiting for them. People were often trading off higher incomes in urban areas for perceived higher levels of amenities. This trade-off may increase in the future, depending on accessibility via better airports, the impact of rising or falling transportation costs, and other factors such as expanded and improved internet access. Over time, demand has increased for goods and assets that more rural high-amenity areas can provide (solitude, outstanding scenery, outdoor recreation, large estates, etc.). Much of what people moving to these areas want is provided by public rather than private goods.

Private and Public Goods and “The Market”

Wilderness and other state and federal lands are public goods that people increasingly want and move toward. By contrast, some economists and others argue that there should be no national parks, wilderness, or other public lands unless they are provided by the logic of an unregulated market.

Periodically, there are calls and movements for the privatization of parts or all of our public lands—whether in the so-called “Sagebrush Rebellion” in the 1980s-1990s, the stand-off at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon, or the current Administration’s attempts to decrease the size of national monuments and other public lands. What is often forgotten in such arguments is how and why public lands came to be. Public lands were set aside because there was a fear of what would happen if market forces were left unchecked.

Capitalism in the early nineteenth century in the United States developed in large part on what economist Thorsten Veblen called “the predatory behavior of a largely unregulated market which will degrade human beings and despoil nature.” This was, for example, exemplified by child labor in the mines, unsafe working conditions, use of the military to put down labor and union unrest, and various forms of labor discrimination or exploitation. Many of these market-based abuses were subsequently eliminated or regulated to one degree or another.

There was also the threat of private companies eliminating the western forests, much as forests had been eliminated in the Midwest. Agencies were established to manage the public lands and to halt giveaways and privatization. Unfortunately, current economic theory does not deal well with public land issues. Nor does the market generally supply them to the public. There are, for example, only a few private wilderness areas in the West.

A Quality of Life Approach

The recognition of the role of public lands points to a theoretical need to expand the economic view of people’s behavior from a simple utilitarian maximizing process to one concerned with quality of life. Maximizing income has not been borne out as the reason why people move into and stay in wilderness and other amenity-based counties. Consequently, there is a need to broaden or replace the traditional economic utility approach.

If quality of life is what really matters, then material goods and services are perhaps a small part of what people care about. Non-economic amenities broadly

defined may be what people really care about. If so, emphasis needs to shift away from how people allocate their income on consumer goods and services. Instead, we need to analyze the full array of what matters to people and the activities they pursue in their daily lives. Public lands and waters in the West then become an important component of such an approach.

What becomes important is how people spend time living near and “using” public lands. Time—not income—is the real constraint we all face. And we can never totally predict how much time we have or when it is up. How we use both the work and leisure time we have is a trade-off with the material goods and services we consume. Have we for too long sacrificed time for consumption goods? The traditional income-utility approach fails to take into account time as well as other inputs.

Attempting to maximize our utility or happiness from privately purchased goods and services may also be antithetical to the goal of achieving cooperation with others, an important contributor to quality of life. The purely economic model presumes no civil society, but in fact we live in a community of people who care about one another. And geographers in particular study and care about places.

Private and Public Goods, Place, Community and Quality of Life

If it creates enjoyment, living and working in an amenity-rich place deepens roots, sense of place, and community ties, leading to increases in quality of life. An increase in public goods (education, libraries, parks, public lands, clean environments, strong community culture, etc.) is in line with increased place values, while an increase in private goods can trigger a decrease in place values. Increased public goods are also reflective of a caring society.

If we don't care for a place, it can be more easily “commodified”—that is, become a place for tourists to consume. Tourism depends on the commodification of leisure, transforming places into objects.

If we want community, what contributes more—private or public goods? Generally, increased public goods do. Public goods are inherently more equitably

shared and not dependent on high incomes. Public goods often substitute for the expensive commodities of higher-income lifestyles. Increasing demand by individuals for the use of public lands can make the goal of income growth itself less attractive given an increased desire to use a wide variety of public lands amenities.

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I am a geographer and we often focus on places, their similarities and differences, as well as on the importance of place. “Place” is normally defined as space that is experienced and given meaning. Human experience creates attachments and connections between people and places, leading to a sense of place.

Attachment to a place keeps people from moving away during times of economic distress or draws them back, which is part of the migration to high-amenity federal lands counties. In today's global world, people can have multiple identities and attachments to different places, multiple senses of place, even a global sense of place. Although we no longer expect to live our lives in the place where we were born, a sense of place, even one acquired late in life, can counteract the emptiness of living everywhere – and nowhere.

French philosopher Simone Weil in her *The Need for Roots* (1952) attacked many of the societal structures that destroyed roots and created an “uprootedness” in society. She argued that the pursuit of profits destroyed roots. By making money the near-sole motive for all actions, the measure of all things, the “poison of

inequality” was introduced in society. Many firms, she argued, have no intrinsic loyalty to any community or country. They fail to adopt society’s goals as their own.

Weil was farsighted in arguing that the purpose of education and work was to increase the appreciation of the beauty of places, nature, and the world, rather than their utilitarian advantages. She placed love as a central concept—love of what exists, love of life, persons, places, nature—and in the process raised the question of how to construct places and societies that we love. I would argue that the study of places includes finding what we could love about them, seeking out their beauty, and then maintaining them.

If we want to move toward an approach that sustains quality of life and community, we need a different set of priorities in which actions that undermine community are unacceptable. We need a society based on the primacy of relationships, emotions, social relations, and “deep living” with meaningful relationships with family, friends, and community.

We need to nurture caring communities. It is precisely the sense of community that gives meaning to our lives. Without it, we are truly alone. Fortunately, there are examples we can look toward. I believe we can learn much from the indigenous Native American tribal societies and cultures.

Learning from Native Americans and Moving Toward Alternative Approaches

A traditional indigenous view of Nature and understanding of life is very different from the worldviews of today’s “mainstream” Western societies. The significance of place, land, landscape, and a shared spiritual relationship sets up different ways of knowing and being that still endure in parts of Indian Country. Everything is seen as interconnected, and everybody is related to everybody else—humans and non-humans. There is a focus on reciprocal giving and sharing.

From a traditional perspective, economics is not the base of life; the profit motive does not reign supreme. Traditionally, lands are not individually owned or privatized. All natural resources are, essentially,

“public” and treated with respect.

Public land management agencies, with some exceptions, have not included nor worked closely with tribes or fostered co-management projects. Fortunately, some environmentalists and other non-Native Americans are listening and starting to work together with tribes. We need to do more of that. Non-Native Americans need to share ideas and worldviews with tribal partners, but more importantly listen with respect and learn.

Concluding Thoughts

The public lands we use for a variety of uses from extraction to recreation or solitude were once tribal lands and used much differently. They were to one degree or another (depending on your historical perspective) either subdued, occupied, ethnically cleansed, voluntarily traded, bought, or with or without fraudulent treaties stolen from tribal nations. Non-Native Americans have a duty on many of these lands to either co-manage them, give them back, or compensate tribes.

A quality-of-life approach moves us away from the traditional utilitarian assumptions and a worldview where desires and wants are unlimited, where there are no resource limits, where efficiency is a paramount driver of our theories. Efficiency is simply not as important a criterion in wealthier countries, high-amenity areas, or within societies with alternative worldviews. Self-interest should be replaced with love in our relations with others. Quality of life is different from traditional utilitarian self-interest and happiness, which are flawed concepts since they lack a moral compass.

Price should not be the determinant of how we classify or use our public lands in a democracy. The value of a tree is not the price it fetches when logged, or how many people recreate, pay, or would pay to sit under it, be near it, or just know it is there. Public goods are provided by democratic processes in society, not priced by it.

Public goods like federal lands and waters compensate somewhat for what otherwise would be affordable only for the rich. They do so in the name of decency

and justice as otherwise our institutions and society promote and reward the most fortunate. Minimizing material inequalities via public goods is a necessary condition for democracy.

I believe in possibility. We cannot predict what will happen but we can allow for it, make space for it (whatever it is), and remain optimistic. Our challenge, whatever our discipline or calling, is to work toward the creation of approaches-models-paradigms—and places—shaped around generosity, beauty, and love of place, rather than self-interest and greed at the expense of others. Quality-of-life models based on this more humane approach are a step in this direction and can help us regain an intimacy with place. And place matters!

Suggested Reading

For some of the early research into quality of life and development issues in the American West, see:

- Rasker, R. 1994. A New Look at Old Vistas: The Economic Role of Environmental Quality in Western Public Lands. *University of Colorado Law Review* 65(2): 369-399.
- Power, T.M. 1996. *Economic Development and Environmental Protection: Economic Pursuit of Quality*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Rudzitis, G. 1996. *Wilderness and the Changing American West*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

For a later review and overview, see:

- Gosnell, H. and J. Abrams. 2009. Amenity migration: diverse conceptualizations of drivers, socioeconomic dimensions, and emerging challenges. *GeoJournal* 76(4): 303-322.

For a larger context of the issues discussed in this essay, see:

- Rudzitis, G., P.E. Graves, and L.A.G. Moss. 2014. Amenities, Public Goods and Community in L.A.G. Moss and R.S. Glorioso, eds. *Global Amenity Migration: Transforming Rural Culture, Economy and Landscape*. Santa Fe: New Ecology Press.
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- Rudzitis, G., D. Marcouiller, and P. Lorah. 2016. The Rural Rich and Their Housing: Spatially Addressing the “Haves” in D. Marcouiller, M. Lapping, and O. Furseth, eds. *Rural Housing, Exurbanization, and Amenity-Driven Development: Contrasting the ‘Haves’ and the ‘Have-Nots.’* New York: Routledge.
- Dearien, C., G. Rudzitis, and J. Hintz. 2006. The Role of Wilderness and Public Land Amenities in Explaining Migration and Rural Development in the American Northwest in G.P. Green, S.C. Deller, and D. Marcouiller, eds. *Amenities and Rural Development: Theory, Methods and Policy*. Northampton, MA: Edgar Elgar.
- Rudzitis, G., N. Barbier, and D. Mallick. 2013. Aging on Indian Reservations: The Ugly, the Bad, and the Good in N. Glasgow and E.H. Berry, eds. *Rural Aging in 21st Century America*. New York: Springer.

Suggested citation:

Rudzitis, G. 2019. Public Lands, Place, and Quality of Life. Rasker, R., ed. *People and Public Lands*. Bozeman, MT: Headwaters Economics.

<https://headwaterseconomics.org/public-lands/people-and-public-lands/>