

AMENITY MIGRATION IN THE U.S. SIERRA NEVADA*

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ABSTRACT. Since 1960 California's Sierra Nevada counties have ranked among the regions with the strongest relative population growth in the state. Reassessment of peripheral areas has been the main force driving population and settlement growth in the central Sierra Nevada of California and Nevada, termed "amenity migration" or "counterurbanization." This study analyzes the impacts of amenity migrants—"urban refugees"—on socioeconomic conditions in high-mountain regions. We define these regions as the "High Sierra," comprising zones at elevations more than 1,800 meters above sea level. People who migrate to the High Sierra tend to be white and well educated, with considerable household earnings. Unlike the population in the foothills, these migrants are not senior citizens. Their demand for periodic or permanent residences has caused housing prices to increase enormously. As a result, a majority of homes are now priced well beyond the reach of local salaries, which may lead to potential conflict between locals and newcomers. The massive settlement expansion in high-mountain areas requires a new approach to land-use planning, one that takes functional regions into account. Therefore, it is expedient to reassess existing jurisdictional boundaries.

Keywords: amenity migration, counterurbanization, population growth, Sierra Nevada.

This study is based on the concept of "amenity migration," a type of urban-to-rural residential movement. According to Laurence Moss, amenity migration refers to "people moving into the mountains to reside year-round or intermittently, principally because of their actual and perceived greater environmental quality and cultural differentiation" (2004, 19). For him, amenity migrants come for both active recreation and passive contemplation; they tend to be economically active and usually need a well-developed information/communications support system as well as relatively convenient access to their new homes of choice. This phenomenon is the driving force behind the current population and settlement growth in the Californian Sierra Nevada (Figure 1).

Amenity migrants, who typically come from highly urbanized centers and are motivated by a desire to escape from negative metropolitan conditions (Moss 2005), had become acquainted with their new place of residence through past leisure-based experiences and bring with them both positive and negative effects. Positive effects include the infusion of new economic, institutional, and physical infrastructure capacity into the host region; negative impacts include unanticipated growth-related stresses on the capacity of local social and health-delivery systems, environmental resources, cultural and recreational facilities, retailing services, and residential housing (Williams and Gill 2004, 2).

Expansion of communities in high-mountain regions is a result of settlement by seasonal or intermittent residents as well as by permanent ones. Therefore,

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