Although British Columbia is among Canada’s fastest-growing provinces, its rural population is shrinking with a projected decrease in population of 12.5% from 2011 to 2025 (1,2). BC’s growth is largely driven by in-migration from other provinces or countries, and these migrants are largely choosing to reside in the urban centers of Vancouver and southern Vancouver Island (1). But some small communities are bucking the trend, maintaining stable or even growing populations with revitalized economies and cultures. In the face of a changing economic landscape, many of these communities are experiencing an influx of new residents attracted to the natural beauty of their environs, unique culture, and opportunities for outdoor recreation. These new arrivals have been dubbed the “amenity migrants” and are among the most important drivers shaping the future of BC’s rural landscape (3).

BC has always been a province rich in natural resources, and our economy remains more dependent on exporting raw materials than Canada as a whole (2). As a result, the origin of most rural and remote communities in BC is deeply linked with a resource extraction economy. Times are changing, however, and as companies increasingly consolidate, adopt labour-shedding automation, and rely on mobile and flexible workforces, rural residents can no longer rely on stable and gainful employment in their home communities. This is driving an increasing number of young people to urban centers to seek education and employment, leaving a shrinking and aging population with fewer and fewer young people to fill service jobs, start new companies, or get involved in their communities (3,4).
and cultural distinctiveness that rural BC has to offer, along with a desire to escape metropolitan living conditions in the big cities. Unlike previous generations of economic migrants whose movement followed the availability of new jobs, these “amenity migrants” are moving primarily for lifestyle factors, and they are bringing promise for the economies of BC’s shrinking hinterland (3,4).

Who are the amenity migrants?

Amenity migrants are far from a homogeneous group, and the profile of migrants is not the same in all areas. Some are semi-retired or retired baby boomers with accrued wealth from their careers and increased value of their primary homes. Others are younger creative professionals who are able to work from home and want to do so in a rural environment. In general, amenity migrants tend to be well-educated with more formal education than local residents of the areas they move to. They also tend to be somewhat wealthier than local residents and have higher demands in terms of services and amenities (2,4,5). They value outdoor recreation and tend to engage in conservation practices which may range from participation in recycling programs and green housing to advocacy for parks and natural spaces (5).

Amenity migrants are drawn to rural communities for a variety of reasons. Many want to escape the rising costs and fast-paced lifestyle of the big cities and are drawn in by affordable land in smaller towns. Others are more attracted to the unique culture of rural locales. Overwhelmingly though, they report being drawn by a connection to nature; they are looking for access to clean water and beautiful views, they want to be close to parks and other natural places, and mostly they are seeking the abundance of opportunities for leisure and outdoor recreation that rural towns have to offer. They may be drawn by large recreational infrastructures like the skiing of whistler and Revelstoke or the golfing and wineries of the Okanagan, or they may be drawn to outdoor recreation activities like mountain biking and climbing in Cumberland, quad-riding, and fishing in the Bulkley Valley, or hiking the trails of Nelson. Regardless of where their interests lie though,
most amenity migrants are drawn by access to diverse, well-developed opportunities for leisure and engagement with nature, and communities that have promoted and become more engaged in these activities have been the most successful in attracting new residents (5).

Making this migration possible is a shifting economic landscape. Many amenity migrants have access to discretionary wealth, either though retirement savings, inheritance, or increased value of their primary homes. For others, the shift to more globalized production and the use of information and communication technologies has allowed them to work from smaller communities by telecommuting (4,6). These younger migrants, in particular, bring considerable expertise and a long-term influx of income to smaller communities. For them, access to high-speed internet, a diversified economy with ample services, and a variety of opportunities to engage with nature are key facilitators for making a move (5).

The promise of amenity migration

Beyond bolstering the populations of small towns, amenity migrants bring wealth, education, skills, and new attitudes. While some migrants move for retirement, the majority are still working full time or are semi-retired when they arrive in their new homes, which means they are important and stable contributors to local economies. In some communities, this influx of new wealth represents a more important economic impact than traditional resource-based economies and tourism combined. The increased demand for services leads to the creation of new businesses and jobs, and the service industry represents the largest economic sector in most BC communities that report significant amenity-led migration (5,6). For some small communities, this represents a draw for young locals to return to the towns they came from after leaving for work or education in bigger cities.

Amenity migrants are drawn in by their appreciation for nature, and this is reflected in the attitudes they bring towards environmental stewardship, access to nature, and conservation behaviours. In the South Okanagan, new arrivals have been identified as leaders in conservation (5), while in Golden and Nelson the new waves of migrants are often heavily involved in expanding opportunities for recreation through trail development and nature advocacy (6).
The perils of amenity migration

While amenity migration has generally been viewed as positive among residents of rural BC communities, it is not entirely unproblematic. By far the most often reported problem associated with amenity migration is the dramatic increase in local real estate prices and the associated problems with housing that come with it. As migrants buy up properties and prices increase, they also attract waves of seasonal workers to meet the increased demand for more services. These new workers and local residents struggle to keep up with rising housing costs, and many communities end up facing the problem of how to provide affordable accommodation for their residents. Eventually, service workers can be entirely priced out of growing towns, with Whistler reporting up to 30% shortfalls in workers to fill service jobs due to problems with housing affordability (6).

The new arrivals also bring new attitudes and opinions; they may be more resistant to resource extraction projects that are popular with local residents and they tend to be less involved in the existing community and culture. Residents in the Okanagan and Bulkley Valleys have voiced concerns that the influx of cosmopolitan city-dwellers is leading to a change in local culture to one they no longer recognize. The residents of Nelson have addressed this directly with their “welcome wagon” program which greets new arrivals and invites them to become active in community activities (3).

Looking forward

The concept of amenity migration is not new, first being described in the 1970’s by American researchers studying mountain towns of the American Rockies. Despite a long history of discussion among academics, awareness of the phenomenon remains low among rural residents and managers (3,4). A 2004 survey of rural BC communities found that the majority of town planners had never heard of the term, and although they could identify elements of amenity migration in their own communities, they had no meaningful way of tracking or adapting to the challenges posed by amenity migration. Most communities that were surveyed did not feel prepared to meet the potential housing, service, and affordability challenges posed by amenity migration. However, they were optimistic about the potential for growing or stable populations and economies (3).

Research into amenity migration remains extremely challenging, but BC is carving out a niche as a leader in data collection and policy development. The South Okanagan and Similkameen Valleys were recently the subjects of the largest and most comprehensive study on amenity migration in North America to date (5), and researchers like BC’s Raymond Chipeniuk (dubbed the “amenity man”) have long been working to draw attention...
to the potential advantages and risks of the phenomenon (7). However, there is still much to be learned about the true economic, social, and ecological impacts of amenity migration and substantial work needs to be done in terms of effective policy development and governance to proactively address it going forward (3).

What is clear is that amenity migration has emerged as one of the most important factors that are shaping BC’s rural landscape, and for many small communities it represents an exciting chance for revitalization. Rural communities have an opportunity to attract a new generation of residents by investing in outdoor recreation infrastructure, access to nature, and conservancy. With ongoing research and effective governance to address the affordability challenges posed by the arrival of new migrants the future for rural BC is full of promise.

**Further reading**

Additional information on amenity migration is available through the International Amenity Migration Center at [http://www.amenitymigration.org/home](http://www.amenitymigration.org/home) and the BC Rural Center at [https://www.bcruralcentre.org/tag/amenity-migration/](https://www.bcruralcentre.org/tag/amenity-migration/). Interested readers will find a wealth of information in Lawrence A.G. Moss’ titles “The Amenity Migrants: Seeking and Sustaining Mountains and Their Cultures” and “Global Amenity Migration: Transforming Rural Culture, Economy, and Landscape”.

**References**


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