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Chapter Nine

Dynamics of seachangers in rural and regional townships Impacts on local communities in transition

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Abstract

The seachange phenomenon has recently returned to the policy and planning agenda in Australia owing to some recent data showing new movement patterns out of capital cities. This chapter presents a discussion around this via review of the literature in the areas of amenity migration, counter-urbanisation and lifestyle migration. It further proposes, through demographic research into the region of Gippsland in Victoria, that we need to begin to better understand the motivations for shifting away from the capital cities and the flow on impacts in local communities. Among these impacts are coastal populations in various stages of flux, transforming communities based on local, familiar ties and an enduring relationship to place with new residents from far and wide. As these communities and places are ‘opened up’ through permanent, semi-permanent and visitor populations, more work is required to understand the local place as one that is increasingly inclusive of converging mobile lives, driving communities in transition and renegotiations of identity, belonging and security.

Key words

seachange; lifestyle migration; transition; counter-urbanisation; transforming communities; Gippsland

Introduction

The phenomenon of seachange, also known as amenity led-migration and/or counter-urbanisation, has captured attention and interest in recognising population turnaround as a characteristic in many regional areas across western societies for some time (Burnley & Murphy, 2004; Fuguitt, 1986; Moss, 2006; Ullman, 1954). Australia’s experience of counter-urban trends is perhaps most similar to the United Kingdom where the quest for the rural idyll and a better way of life has driven people from the cities (Benson & O’Reilly, 2009; Burnley & Murphy, 2004). Australia’s geography and concentration of economic activities in centralised metropolises has meant that movement into what is known as high amenity rural and coastal areas tends to be difficult for those without financial capital or flexible working arrangements (Argent, Tonts, Jones & Holmes, 2011; cf. Hugo & Bell, 1998).

Although in the past research has demonstrated some evidence of welfare led migration into some of the country’s rural/regional places (Hugo & Bell, 1998), the quest for the coastal and rural idyll for the middle classes has been shown repeatedly to be a key driver for internal

migration (Osbaldiston, 2010; 2012). As planners argue, this can then have flow-on impacts both economically, environmentally and socially on the host locations (Gurran, Squires & Blakely, 2006) and ensuing impacts such as gentrification, for instance, can be a source of ‘social turbulence’, which is also exacerbated by second/holiday home ownership (Osbaldiston, 2012, p. 5; Osbaldiston & Picken, 2014a).

This chapter explores this and other potential impacts of population turnaround in seachange locales that find themselves shifting from a localised notion of community to one that is opened to the influences of lifestyle migrations that flow from a variety of variously different, but largely urban origins. It will do this by examining the conceptualisation of seachange as a type of lifestyle migration (Benson & O’Reilly, 2009) which has developed along Australia’s coastal stretch. Data from the Gippsland region in eastern Victoria and in some western Victorian places which are diverse both geographically and demographically will be drawn upon. The chapter will begin to explore the composition of places that are undergoing transformation through the residential mobility of those seeking counter-urban lifestyles and the way they and interrelated mobilities of part time residence and the visitor economy are opening up communities to denser networks of people from *other communities and places*. This leads to an opening up of places in terms of their community mix and the strength of ties beyond the local that has implications for perceptions and realities of safety and security – of the rural idyll as a haven.

Conceptualising population turnaround: From amenity migration to lifestyle migration

In general, it is accepted amongst social scientists that regional Australia has been heavily restructured over recent time through globalisation and neoliberal policies, politics and practices (Cheshire & Lawrence, 2011; Gray & Lawrence, 2001). Within this framework, “local communities are pitted against one another in the competition for services and funding, thus fostering regional jealousies and animosities” (Cheshire & Lawrence, 2011, p. 440). Alongside this, a general decline in population across these regions, through youth migration specifically (Argent & Walmsely, 2008; Alston, 2004), has created an environment where internal migrants are welcomed, and even sought at the regional level through marketing and more sophisticated place identity development (Osbaldiston, 2012). Prior research demonstrates how communities across the world market their place-identity to potential migrants emphasising natural (landscapes) and cultural amenity (communities) in efforts to attract new comers (Osbaldiston, 2012; Gillon & Gibbs, 2018).

Geographers for some time have described this movement as amenity-led migration (Ullman, 1954). Effectively, this represents the shifting of people from cities into rural/coastal places where landscape is both productive and consumption based. The amenity sought after differs from “rugged coastal ranges” through to “small towns and old dairy farms” which are “desired for their heritage” value (Argent et al., 2011, p. 27). This has led to differentiation in the social and economic shaping of these areas where traditional farming communities, as an example, are transformed into production/consumption-based industries. Moss and Glorioso (2011), amongst others, demonstrate for instance the development of local consumer-based industries – from boutique and craft shops, hobby farming to gastro-tourism practices. Over time, these practices can result in middle-class gentrification of regional places, which is evident mostly in English literature (Cloke & Thrift, 1990).

Geographers tend to argue that primary motivations for this counter-urban trend revolve around the shift to a consumption and recreation-based society (Moss, 2006). Halfacree (2012; 2014, p. 99) offers a more nuanced account by arguing that “rurality in the guise of landscape and nature becomes both affective and effective”. It presents an aesthetic of “slowing down”, “feeling life” through a temporal change (being more in tune with nature), “rootedness within everyday life” that is felt more abundantly in rural places and a capacity to relearn purpose in ‘one’s life’ (Halfacree, 2014, p. 99). Counter-urbanisation, and the pull of the rural idyll, has also been widely adopted into culture as witnessed with television programs such as *Escape to the Country* (Halfacree, 2008). These contribute towards the ongoing (re)construction of rural myths, combined with increasing reflexivity over everyday practices creating a desire to leave the city and dwell amongst high environmental and natural amenity (Halfacree, 2008).

In Australia, the coast tends to be more revered than rural in-land settings (Argent et al. 2011; Osbaldiston, 2018). Coasts have played a major role in past domestic tourism trends where family holidays were often spent in beachside townships or cities (Osbaldiston & Picken, 2014b). The beach in early modernity was a place for escape from the harshness of industrial life. For instance, in Queensland, places like Noosa became celebrated for their rejuvenating qualities for miners in well populated inland communities like Gympie (Osbaldiston, 2018). It is no coincidence then that much of the recent data around seachange tends to see dramatic population turnaround in past domestic tourism hotspots which have transformed coastal landscapes considerably. As Argent et al. (2011) show in their empirical work, the beach indeed has significant pulling power for Australians. Whether this will change as baby boomers shift into retirement and younger generations grow older is unknown for now.

Sociologists push Halfacree’s (2008) ideas further by considering this movement of people away from cities, both domestically and internationally, within migration scholarship. In particular, ‘lifestyle migration’ as a concept has received widespread attention since the term was constructed by Benson and O’Reilly (2009, p. 3) to describe people who shift for a “better way of life”. Initially, the concept signified the “spatial mobility of relatively affluent individuals of all ages” who seek out new places that offer up distinct lifestyles. In short, this approach recognised an underlying middle-class quest for a more fulfilling and authentic life (Benson & O’Reilly, 2009; Benson, 2011; 2012; 2013; Osbaldiston, 2012). Thinking of lifestyle as a primary motivation for migration seems to offer an alternative to dominant themes in migration literature such as labour, forced or the recent environmental migration. However, Benson and O’Reilly (2015, p. 2) have countered this by arguing that the concept is meant to promote an analytical framework which recognises the “identity-making and moral considerations on how to live” which the middle-class especially wrestles with. Thus, they argue that it is more appropriate to talk about *lifestyle-in-migration* where lifestyle plays a role in the imagining of lives pre-migration, and the way lives are experienced post-migration (Benson & O’Reilly, 2015).

Through this lens, therefore, “lifestyle as a concept offers a way of introducing choice and consumption into discussions about migration” which need to be drawn out ‘inductively from research’ (Benson & O’Reilly, 2015, p. 14). Instead of simply talking about labour or economic migration, for instance, we can understand lifestyle as a contributing factor in the decision-making (especially of the middle-classes) where greater agency allows for choice in determining where lifestyles will be ‘better’. This change in direction can potentially then water-down the dramatic choices people make in shifting away from the cities in places like Australia.

As argued elsewhere, seachange as a concept is meant to denote a philosophical and existential change to how one lives (Osbaldiston, 2012). This includes dramatic shifts to consumption practices and even employment. However, over time this term has been somewhat co-opted by the real-estate industry to describe geographical shifts – hence the popularity of the term ‘tree-change’. Regardless of this criticism, however, it is beneficial to consider ‘lifestyle’ not as a type of migration, but rather as a feature within migration especially when considering counter-urban trends in Australia. For unlike amenity migration, which focusses on natural environments generally, attuning ourselves to the lifestyle found ‘in-migration’ allows us to unpack a range of factors including the lifestyles that one is seeking and the lifestyles one is leaving (Osbaldiston, 2012). In short, it allows us to theoretically and empirically ask questions about what is driving the desire to seek lifestyle change, and also examine the agency of certain groups to actively make this choice or not. Further, it allows us to explore where their ideals lead them to shift to and how much agency is involved in this decision-making.

A snapshot of seachanging today: Gippsland, Victoria

To further this discussion within the context of Australia, some data is presented here around the area of Gippsland in eastern Victoria. The region is well known for both its agricultural and coal-mining sectors which contribute importantly to local economies. It is also a place of high vulnerability to natural disaster and parts were heavily impacted by the 2009 Victorian Black Saturday Bushfire events (followed by a 2010 flood; bushfires in 2013-14 and 2019-20; and Moe/Morwell mine fires).

In addition to this, Gippsland represents some of the more disadvantaged communities in the Socio-Economic Indexes for Australia (SEIFA) provided by the ABS (2016). As Table 9.1 demonstrates, the Latrobe and East Gippsland Shire Council Areas in particular are below the 35th percentile when compared to other local council areas in Australia. Some of this is due to declining industries and employment including subsequent impacts of the privatisation of the energy industry in Latrobe in the mid to late 1990s. Gippsland’s low socio-economic status is also found in median household income rates when compared to Victoria as a whole (Table 9.2).

[INSERT TABLE 9.1 HERE]

[INSERT TABLE 9.2 HERE]

Despite this Gippsland is also a place of high natural amenity with places such as Phillip Island, Inverloch, Mount Baw Baw and Lakes Entrance all featuring as tourist hotspots. Recent research also indicates that Melbourne residents hold significant investment in the areas of Phillip Island and Inverloch in the form of holiday or second homes (Osbaldiston, Picken & Duffy, 2015; Osbaldiston & Picken, 2014b). There is evidence of this also being the case in Lakes Entrance, Metung and areas around East Gippsland and Wellington Shire. However, less known is the impact of seachange on these areas and whether Gippsland is receiving escapees from cities across Australia.

Subsequently, using ABS data¹ we set out to discover what the rates of migration (internal) were into Gippsland from major capital cities in Australia (Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide, Hobart, Perth, Darwin, Canberra) (Figure 9.1). This method of focussing on capital cities as the exit point for migrants is questionable. Certainly, there is some evidence of seachangers shifting from one regional locality to another (Osbaldiston, 2012). However, for the most part, the defining feature of seachange or lifestyle migration (as noted above) is the shift away from capital cities for various reasons. In order to provide some comparison, we also analysed data from the west coast of Victoria in the Surf Coast, Colac-Otway and Corangamite local government areas which govern important lifestyle/tourist spots like Lorne, Torquay and Apollo Bay. Of course, these areas are also home to the oft visited Great Ocean Road.

[INSERT FIGURE 9.1 HERE]

As Figure 9.1 demonstrates, the amount of people shifting into Gippsland local government areas (LGAs) during 2011-2016 is significantly weighted towards ex-Melbournites. Proximity to the area plays a significant role here without doubt. As such, the rest of our analysis will focus on the Melbourne migration into these areas. While there is some evidence of a wider trend of people shifting away from interstate capitals into areas of high amenity (Tasmania, Cairns, Sunshine Coast), the number of people moving into Gippsland is quite low. When we matched this up against the three western Victorian LGAs, the difference was not significant, which was surprising (5.65% of the population from Melbourne). Places like Torquay and Lorne have however reached a point where new development is difficult. Yet, the aggregation of the data hides more specific information that helps us identify some trends. Firstly, as Figure 9.2 illustrates, the trend towards Bass Coast (11.49% of the population) and Baw Baw (9.50% of the population) is much higher than the aggregate of Melbournites shifting into Gippsland. Similarly, those moving into the Surf Coast LGA (9.29% of the population) are significantly higher than the Colac-Otway and Corangamite (3.16%, 2.27%). What this suggests to us, especially in the cases of Bass Coast and Baw Baw, is a need to examine the amenities and features of these two LGAs that positions them above others in terms of attractiveness to migrants.

[INSERT FIGURE 9.2 HERE]

Again, proximity likely plays a role here. Bass Coast, Baw Baw and Surf Coast all are situated within a medium travel time to Melbourne. It is likely also that Baw Baw and Bass Coast are receiving in-migrants due to housing costs within Melbourne's greater suburbia. Places like Warragul (Baw Baw LGA) have received approximately 44 percent of their population through in-migration from outside their Statistical Level 2 (Author calculations using ABS Census of Population and Housing Data, 2016). This does not mean all of these are ex-Melbourne residents, but does suggest that places like these that sit on the fringe are set to become peri-metropolitan townships (Burnley & Murphy, 2004). In short, if transportation into Melbourne (via public transport) is better serviced, places like Warragul become commuter towns for city workers.

Nevertheless, the mean percentage of ex-Melbournites in-migrating in our sample is 6.07 (SD=3.39) and Bass Coast, Baw Baw and Surf Coast all are situated well above this. To

¹ Data was mined using ABS Tablebuilder. Graphs/Tables represent the author's own calculations using this data. Sampling error is assumed at 5 percent. In some cases, due to confidentiality, numbers are approximate. As such, we have avoided using statistics that are too low in our discussions.

examine this further, we drew a small sample of suburbs from those listed in areas we know already are attractive for their natural amenity and lifestyles. The results are shown in Figure 9.3. Clearly, Lorne (which has a small population) attracts the most in-migration from Melbourne due most likely to the relationship of holiday homes that exists there. Similarly, Cowes (Phillip Island) as mentioned previously has a significantly large population of second-homes. What we might be witnessing, as noted in Osbaldiston, Picken and Duffy's (2015) research, is a shifting of people into their holiday/second homes on a permanent basis. It is important to note that the suburb farthest away from Melbourne, Lakes Entrance, has a much smaller (and on par with the Gippsland average in-migration) percentage movement in from Melbourne compared to the other relatively closer suburbs. It is also clear, as will be discussed later, that Lakes Entrance is perhaps the site for some recent heavy debate in terms of sea-level rise and future adaptation problems perhaps causing some concern for potential migrants (Hurlimann et al., 2014).

While we can speculate how many of these people have actually shifted for 'lifestyle' purposes or simply for labour migration or other reasons, it is clear that we do not have the data to be able to really make this argument (wholly). Rather, as indicated above, we can talk generally about how lifestyle is increasingly becoming a factor 'in' migration (Benson & O'Reilly, 2015). Qualitative and other research conducted by these authors and others demonstrates that this is clearly the case in Australia (Osbaldiston, 2012; Osbaldiston & Picken, 2014a; Burnley & Murphy, 2004; cf. Argent et al., 2011).²

[INSERT FIGURE 9.3 HERE]

It is also important to locate age groupings of these in-migrants to challenge assumptions that these are mostly baby-boomers seeking amenity for retirement. As such, we distinguished the age groups of the in-migrants (from Melbourne) into our sampled LGAs (see Figure 9.4). The data reflects a fairly wide spread of age-groups amongst the in-migrants from Melbourne. Importantly, the percentage of 20-59 year-olds moving into the Gippsland area from Melbourne is over half (57.76%) in comparison to the retiree age brackets (26.49%).

[INSERT FIGURE 9.4 HERE]

When we break this data down smaller into specific LGAs though (Figure 9.5), it is clear that Latrobe, Wellington and Baw Baw LGAs are leaders in attracting younger migrants. East Gippsland (24.93%) and Bass Coast (25.23%) both have very high, what we assume, retirement migration. This certainly resonates with the anecdotal evidence we have witnessed in these locations. Retirees with excess income from properties sold in Melbourne are able to purchase homes with high natural amenity and lifestyle qualities in places like Phillip Island and Lakes Entrance/Metung. When we compared this data to the Surf Coast, Colac-Otway and Corangamite LGAs, we noted that a less distinguishable trend was showing. In these respective LGAs, the age groupings were consistent from 30-69 years (Figure 9.6) with the exception of some younger migration to Corangamite and some older migration to the Surf Coast. More research will need to be undertaken in order to make sense of this, however.

[INSERT FIGURE 9.5 HERE]

² Of interest to us as migration researchers, but not for this paper, is results from Khoo, McDonald and Hugo (2009) who show that for Western European migrants into Australia on the now defunct 457 temporary visas, 'lifestyle' as a category played a major role in their decision-making.

[INSERT FIGURE 9.6 HERE]

One of the other variables we were interested in comparing was that of income and education. As noted above, questions of agency are well tied in lifestyle migration literature to social structures such as class, status and even ethnicity (Benson, 2013; Hayes, 2014; 2018). In addition to this, though, wealth and income potentially provide a geographical arbitrage in international lifestyle migration as shown by Hayes (2014; 2018). Specifically, the capacity for one's wealth to be worth significantly more in the global south has driven for instance North American migration into South America, and European migration into Asia (Benson & O'Reilly, 2018). While clearly not definitively the same situation, there is a sort of domestic geographical arbitrage in a continent as large as Australia where property prices between Sydney/Melbourne/Brisbane are significantly higher than most regional areas. This then creates an opportunity (agency) for middle-class migrants in cities to afford places of great amenity value in places like those in this sample.

Unfortunately measuring wealth levels with census data is difficult. Not captured at the level required to make these sorts of assessments are contributors like superannuation, other homes, investment, shares, interest and so on. However, as Figure 9.7 illustrates, we are able to capture personal income of the in-migrants into the Gippsland LGAs. While not overly clear, there is a trend towards the lower-middle income categories (\$AUD1-\$1249 per week). In addition to this there is a large percentage of in-migrants who are 'not applicable' which includes children and retirees. When we compare this to those who shift to the west, there is some discernible difference especially with the Surf Coast where there are more migrants in the higher end of the income spectrum in relation to other locations (see Figure 9.8)

[INSERT FIGURE 9.7 HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 9.8 HERE]

Education is far more distinct in terms of those shifting than other variables (see Figure 9.11). Of interest to us here is the number of in-migrants who hold a bachelor degree or higher in the three western Victoria LGAs selected. In all three, there is a marked difference between these and those from the Gippsland LGAs. For the western sample, 33.63 percent of migrants held a bachelor degree or higher at the time of census. Conversely, only 21.66 percent of in-migrants into Gippsland held a bachelor degree or higher. As Figure 9.9 also indicates, the number of in-migrants in the Surf Coast who only hold a Year 9 education level or lower is significantly less than the other LGAs sampled. Again, we can see a trend in the Surf Coast area of an upper middle-class migration when compared to Gippsland. While this educational trend does not necessarily equate to any specific conclusion, it does give us context to discuss issues that might emerge in the future with seachange/lifestyle migration.

[INSERT FIGURE 9.9 HERE]

Lifestyle as a contributing factor to rural/regional change

When considering these results, it is important to recognise that Australia is both geographically and demographically diverse. Subsequently, a case study like this in Victoria will not necessarily translate across different 'seachange' locations. In Cairns in far north Queensland, for instance, a larger portion of those shifting in are from capital cities like Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney, but are also labour migrants who have access to tourism

markets. Conversely, migrants into northern New South Wales (to places such as Byron Bay) are much more likely to hold significant income and occupations that are diverse but also mobile due to the geographical position of the coastal townships. Regardless of this, there are some broad issues that we can present here as discussion points which require further elaboration within each specific setting.

As we have set out in our analysis of the data above, it is important to note who is actually moving and to where. Places like the Surf Coast appear to be attracting specific types of people. They are professionals, with higher incomes than most (or retired people with wealth) and most likely to be well educated. In places like East Gippsland, which is not noted for scoring well on socio-economic indexes, the in-migrants tend to be mid to lower middle classes with less income and lower levels of formal education. A number of factors contribute to who is moving and where. Moss and Glorioso (2011, p. 13) argue that we need to identify both the motivators and the facilitators when examining migration of this kind. Consumption of amenity (high value environment and community values) needs to be tempered with the availability of recreational activities, cost of living, comfort and technological access (such as internet) (Moss & Glorioso, 2011, p. 13).

Halfacree (2014) similarly argues that we should also consider socio-political contexts. In a place like Lakes Entrance, for instance, there has been a significant amount of attention placed on both the socio-economic inequality and the potential harm of sea-level rise (Hurlimann et al., 2016). In 2010, specifically, the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal overturned an application for development in the heart of Lakes Entrance's township based on the precautionary principle focussed on future impacts of sea-level rise. The result was a wide spread discussion around the future of development in the LGA and other Gippsland coastal communities. While this discussion has occurred in places like the Surf Coast, there has been no significant decision like this that has held back development. It is clear that Lakes Entrance is disadvantaged socio-economically and ethnographic work in the township suggest a marked distinction in the infrastructure and development when compared to a place like Torquay.

Conclusion: Communities in transition

Gentrification is one of the frequent transitions to arise from lifestyle migration (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009; 2018; Gurrán et al., 2009; Hayes, 2014; Moss & Glorioso, 2011). The middle-class habitus (Benson, 2010) both influences why people want to leave the city, and how they live post-migration. Emphasis is often placed on rising housing and other cost of living expenses as the middle-classes move in (Osbaldiston & Picken, 2014a). Hayes (2018) and Benson (2014) show in their work in South America that gentrification can impact on social and political contexts. Resistance to in-migrants at times can create friction, but the host township's interest in economic gain often means that migrants are privileged, even as affordability for the younger generations in those same townships fade. In some cases, migrants seek to blend in and become locals (Benson, 2010). In other cases, migrants are temporal – shifting in and out according to seasons or to economic/social conditions (Benson & O'Reilly, 2018; Hayes, 2018). When discussing the effects on local communities, nuance is required in understanding who is moving where and how do those changes play out post-migration. Examining the social and cultural capital of in-migrants is very important in determining the likely influence on decision-making (O'Reilly, 2012) and on the changes to affordability for the existing populations.

It is also important to note that these locations form a nexus between tourism, second home ownership/tourism and permanent lifestyle migration (Hall & Müller, 2004; Paris, 2011). Lifestyle migration locales are not only characteristic of permanent migrants but also of visitors and seasonal visitors, some of whom invest in a holiday home with a view to a permanent move at a later time. What is key to understanding the increasingly dense networks of association that come to influence these places is that they are performed at the intersection of various forms of residential mobility, combining those who move for good and for all of the time, those who move for part of the time and those who's stay is short. Hence permanent migration is usually only one driver of the densification of networks between the urban and its counter spaces.

The connection of the upper-middle classes to places like Torquay, Lorne, Phillip Island and Inverloch, through their holiday home escapes is well founded (Paris, 2011; Osbaldiston & Picken, 2014b; 2016). These places exist on the outer fringe of Melbourne and provide access to escape from the city on the weekends (or longer). The connection with place and the desire to spend more time away from metropolitan stresses links the potential migrant already. It is apt in stressing the influence of networks and mobility patterns on local community and place, that second homeowners, are described in the literature as both tourists and residents. They highlight the transitoriness of populations both urban and rural, and the density of networks connecting them. Second homeowners themselves are known for sharing their homes with their extended family and friends and, increasingly, with the short-stay accommodation market. A study of Tasmania's east coast, an area that is not dissimilar to the Gippsland, found high levels of second-homeownership accompanied some destabilisation of the community (Atkinson, Picken & Tranter, 2006; 2009). Communities were uneasy with the opportunity for crime afforded by empty homes, leading to safety concerns and also resentment about obligations to protect empty neighbourhood homes, which were viewed as attractors of criminal activity, like trespass and robbery. Since then, the advent of accommodation platforms has opened up new uses of empty second homes and also new reasons to invest in them.

It is this 'opening up' of community that has most relevance for questions of safety, security and crime and this requires more attention in lifestyle migration literature than it has so far received. As the broader Australian population becomes more mobile across the life course, inviting greater possibility for permanent, semi-permanent migration and the pursuit of lifestyle goals through migration, the idea of a rural or coastal place as a 'haven' becomes less simplistically true than it once was. As these places become host to greater networks of people from and in places elsewhere, local identity and practices shift in response and this includes practices based on assumptions of familiarity and regularity of behaviours that make rural regions appear somewhat predictable and safe in comparison to larger, urban societies.

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