Amenity migration in the U.S. Sierra Nevada
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Abstract
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.

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, counterurbanization--the rediscovery and reevaluation of rural areas as permanent residential and commercial space (Berry 1976)--has to be integrated into the phenomenon known as "amenity migration."

Tourism, however, is not seen as part of amenity migration. For Moss, "amenity migrants are in situ more than tourists ... and spend considerable time in active and passive use of the natural environment. Particularly in the montane context of comparative scarcity, they significantly increase the use of local amenities" (2004, 19). Whereas tourists typically visit without intending to reside or earn a living in their destinations, amenity migrants plan to settle at their destination permanently, seasonally (for one or more periods within a year), or intermittently (moving among their residences more frequently). In addition, amenity migrants (except retirees) may transfer their jobs to the destination selected, add or create new jobs, and/or engage in business activities there. Nevertheless, tourism plays an important role because it can be seen as a first step toward amenity migration.

The phenomenon of "amenity migration" constitutes a relatively new area of geographical research. Not surprisingly, academic literature on this topic is therefore rather limited. Most of the research on amenity migration and its impacts on mountain regions has been conducted by Moss (1994, 2004, 2005, 2006). He, Martin Price, and Peter Williams analyzed the correlation between tourism and amenity migration (Price, Moss, and Williams 1997). They identified those aspects that tourism and amenity migration have in common, as well as the impact of amenity migrants and their characteristics. Susan Stewart addresses theoretical perspectives on, the social context of, and the implications associated with amenity migrations (2002). She argues that amenity migration has great potential for reshaping settlement patterns, because jobs no longer link people to places. This is especially true for "resource-rich rural places." Mountain towns are characterized by a growing equity gap, a shortage of affordable housing, and "long-term residents moving to adjoining or outlying communities where land prices and housing are cheaper" (Rademan 2003, 2). The consequence is the so-called downvalley syndrome: bedroom communities, involving long commutes at times, and dispersed settlement in mountain regions. Peter Williams and Alison Gill describe the characteristics of amenity migrants, their impact on Whistler, British Columbia, and how amenity migrants influence the future of their chosen destination (2004). Raymond Chipeniuk, who investigated the correlation between amenity migration and planning in the mountain communities of British Columbia, found "a pattern of adequate planning potential combined with inadequate planning
In contrast, a considerable body of scholarship has addressed counterurbanization, an area that Clare Mitchell has analyzed from a methodological perspective (2004). Because terminology in this area is inconsistent, Mitchell uses "counter-urbanization" as an umbrella term for all manifestations of population deconcentration. Consequently, she views exurbanization as one aspect of counterurbanization. In this study, however, we distinguish between these two types of metropolitan deconcentration: Exurbanization processes typify settlement expansions in the lower-elevation foothills of the Sierra Nevada, around or near the big cities, so daily commuting to the urban centers is a hallmark of exurbanization (Spectorsky 1955, 7). By contrast, counterurbanization indicates movement of metropolitan populations to remote and peripheral locations. Aileen Stockdale, Allan Findley, and David Short (2000), Gareth Lewis (2000), and--to a large extent--Anthony Champion (1998) also support this concept.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The present study deals exclusively with rural, high-altitude regions. The expansion of urban areas ("suburbanization") and the growth of settlements just outside the suburban belt ("exurbanization") will therefore not be addressed in greater detail.

The broad discussion at the 40. Deutscher Geographentag 1975 clearly showed how difficult it is to find an appropriate definition for "high-mountain regions" (Uhlig and Ehlers 1976). For the purpose of our analysis, we provide a pragmatic answer to the awkward question of definition: Because the zone above exurbia that stretches up to about 1,000 meters above sea level is largely unpopulated in California, we identify all parts of the Sierra Nevada above 1,800 meters--usually too remote for daily commuting to metropolitan areas--as high-mountain regions, or the "High Sierra."

The "Golden State" of California, which has long been a destination for migrants within the United States, is now confronted with a demographic countertrend. As the Public Policy Institute of California has shown in its publications (for example, Johnson 2000, 2002), more Californians have left their state since the 1990s than U.S. citizens have entered. For many, economic reasons spurred this wave of "movin' out" (2000, 11); for others, the trigger was the political dissatisfaction that led to the recall of Gov. Gray Davis in 2003. Paul Starrs and John Wright emphasized that these net movements out of California significantly increased the population of the Great Basin states of Nevada and Utah (1995). Nevertheless, the population of California continues to grow as a result of high fertility rates and immigration from other nations.

In contrast to the demographic picture of California as a whole, the migratory balance in the Californian mountains is not negative. In fact, counties in the Sierra Nevada have experienced some of the highest relative growth rates in California since the 1960s. This trend, based primarily on the migration balance, continues to this day (Figure 2). James Parsons was the first to recognize a shift of population from the cities to rural areas, specifically to the foothills of the Sierra Nevada (1972a, 1972b, 1979). Referring explicitly to the high-mountain regions, Ernst Steinicke and his colleagues have repeatedly addressed population growth since the 1960s in various publications. By and large, growth is seen as a consequence of counterurbanization (Steinicke 1995, 2000, 2001; Hofmann and Steinicke 2004; Loeffler and Steinicke 2004, 2006). Further research activities show, however, that a good part of the settlement expansion is associated not only with permanent migration but also with seasonal or...