

## **RURAL AMENITY AND RURAL CHANGE IN TEMPERATE AUSTRALIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY**

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### **Abstract**

#### **Rural Amenity and Rural Change in Temperate Australia: Implications for Development and Sustainability**

Many rural areas in the developed world are experiencing planning and development challenges related to processes of population change. The nature, direction and regional manifestations of these changes are strongly related to the varying levels of local amenity. These result from the qualities of the local social, economic and physical environments and contribute to the ability of rural regions to attract and retain residents. In turn the presence or absence of this attractive ability is likely to engender development and sustainability challenges related to growth, decline or (where the attractive forces are demographically specific) social mix. This paper considers these challenges in the context of high amenity rural regions in temperate Australia.

#### **Key words**

rural amenity, migration, temperate Australia, counter urbanisation, demographic change

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## 1. Introduction

Over recent decades, there has been increasing recognition that migration into rural regions and communities across some parts of the developed world is driving complex and far-reaching processes of demographic, economic, social, cultural and land-use change. According to the Anglo-American literature, the key empirical markers of these changes can be seen in, for example, the conversion of once productive farmland into rural residential allotments; the effective abandonment of marginally productive country for conservation purposes; the growth of alternative, particularly boutique, farm industries; and the gradual displacement of long-established community and village families by highly mobile and frequently more affluent ex-urban migrants (Phillips 1993, 1999, 2002, Cloke et al. 1995, Ilbery and Bowler 1998, Loeffler and Steinicke 2007). It is now almost taken for granted that ex-urban in-migrants – especially those of higher socio-economic status and possibly those who comprise what Florida (2003) terms the ‘creative class’ – are attracted to particular environmental niches. Coastal, montane, lacustrine and riparian landscapes are usually regarded as the most popular settings for this group (McGranahan 1999, Deller et al. 2001, Burnley and Murphy 2004, Hunter et al. 2004, Loeffler and Steinicke 2007). By moving in, though, members (and perhaps especially the ‘creative’ members) of this group are also seen as moulding the social, economic, demographic and biophysical landscapes of their new home areas in accordance with their own tastes, producing long-standing and often dramatic impacts on their destination communities and environments. These impacts are variously seen as fundamental altering the original rural nature of these areas or as a means of fostering local or regional sustainability.

In the Australian context, many aspects of this scenario ring true, particularly if we adopt a narrow focus on the most highly accessible, high-amenity zones within the national ecumene. Yet considerable evidence also exists to temper at least some of the grander claims of widespread counterurbanisation-led rural gentrification. For example, Hugo and Bell’s (1998) analysis of Australian counterurbanisation flows during the 1980s and 1990s highlighted the major role of social-security dependent ex-suburban residents in this migration stream. High housing establishment costs in cities and the portability of Australian welfare benefits were seen as key factors facilitating this group’s migration into cheaper, but higher amenity, locations, typically in coastal regions.

Nevertheless, there is wide agreement that the socio-economic and demographic trajectories of the rural communities and regions within the Australian ecumene are diverging (Hugo 2005, Smailes et al. 2005, Holmes 2006). It is the argument of this paper that *amenity* is playing an increasingly powerful role in this process of diversification, with local socio-economic and land-use agendas being set by the modes of expression and comparative strengths of amenity values, relative to those of primary production.

We therefore seek, to investigate the environmental, demographic and socio-economic impacts of these migration trends upon temperate Australia’s high amenity rural host communities.

## **2. Amenity-led migration into rural areas: a review**

As a component of internal migration (i.e. permanent population movement within national boundaries), amenity-related migration is widely regarded as a key subset of counterurbanisation. In Australia, the lifestyle-related aspects of counterurbanisation have been popularised by media friendly labels such as 'sea change', 'tree change' and 'hill change' (see Burnley and Murphy 2004, Hugo 2005, Walmsley et al. 2009). One of the key concerns in the literature describing and discussing these particular migration streams, is the cumulative impact of the in-migration of relatively wealthy, well-educated, middle- to upper-class and, arguably, 'creative' people into hitherto predominantly working class, primary production-oriented rural communities, economies and labour markets. In short, counterurbanisation is assumed to lead to the gentrification and/or the revitalisation of these rural communities.

Rural gentrification has formed a major and growing theme in British rural studies over the past three decades (Cloke and Thrift 1987, 1990, Cloke and Goodwin 1992, Phillips 1993, 1999, 2002, 2004, Cloke et al. 1995, Lewis 1998). Arguing for a more carefully nuanced and interpretative approach to the study of gentrification, Phillips – by reference to Lefebvre's spatial triad – has explored the material processes by which gentrified rural spaces are created (e.g. the displacement of working-class rural residents by service-class, ex-urban residents over time and the resultant rural land value increases); the various forms and appearances that these gentrified rural spaces take (e.g. atavistic 'heritage' housing styles and land use zoning changes); the key agents involved in the gentrification process (including real estate agents and local government officers as well as the in-migrants themselves); and the (often contradictory) motives and ideals of in-migrants regarding their 'landscapes of desire', as well as the ideological and cultural lenses through which such people interpret its ongoing evolution.

According to Phillips, gentrification can be observed and examined as the following: 1) a series of material processes (e.g. flows of capital and migrants and the physical transformation of rural housing and land uses); 2) the various (and often competing) representations of these processes (e.g. changes in average income levels, and real estate advertising, the iconography of heritage housing styles and council zoning maps); and 3) the actual lived experiences of the key 'change agents' involved in this process (i.e. in-migrants' perceptions of their migration motives and their interpretations of their new host communities, and real estate agents' and local council planners' perspectives on the impacts of in-migration). In Australia, a number of case studies of amenity-led in-migration to select rural niches have touched on, or alluded to, the possible gentrification of rural communities and their hinterlands (Selwood et al. 1996, Tonts and Greive 2002).

Despite some recent valuable contributions to the literature concerning the motivations of counterurbanisation migrants (Flood 1991, Walmsley et al. 1998, Smailes 2002, Burnley and Murphy 2004), there has been little concerted effort to specify the ensemble of environmental attributes which comprise rural amenity, and the ways in which these affect the desire of ex-urban migrants to move to (certain) rural areas. Some recent light has been shed on this issue in a number of papers concerned with rural population growth and regional economic development (McGranahan 1999, Deller et al. 2001) and rural gentrification in North America (Hunter et al. 2004). Following McGranahan's (1999: 1) declaration that amenity is

the new "rural comparative advantage", these papers adopt a synoptic view of the measurement of amenity and the testing of its association(s) with rural population growth and with the in-movement of the more affluent and the more educated.

Not surprisingly, rural amenity is argued by these authors to intersect significantly with the set of environmental attributes that make areas attractive for natural resource extraction, including farming. Consequently, as 'new' interests interpret and 'value' these attributes in different (albeit, at times, in highly conservative and even conservationist) ways, resource conflicts ensue as land prices are bid up, leading to pressure for displacement, characteristically, of production by consumption.

McGranahan's (1999) amenity index – the independent variable – incorporated three seasonal climatic variables ('warm winter', 'winter sun' and 'summer humidity'), a single topographic variable and a surface water indicator, together with a proxy accessibility/remoteness variable ('urban influence code'). Detailed analysis of this index revealed that the individual climate attributes achieved the highest correlation coefficients, suggesting that the index was better able to predict winter migration than other types of population movement.

Deller et al. (2001) adopted a very similar approach to that of McGranahan, using a composite range of climatic variables, a surface water resource indicator, a land resource indicator (per cent of land in wilderness, forest, farms and state parks), a composite 'winter recreation' variable and a 'recreational facilities' indicator as input into a principal components analysis so as to identify high- and low-amenity rural regions, and the relationships between amenity, population growth and income. Hunter et al. (2004) similarly developed a composite amenity scale, incorporating measures of climate, topography and water area, in their quest to establish whether or not high amenity zones tended to experience higher levels of immigration and/or gentrification.

In Australia, the increasingly critical role of amenity values in shaping rural futures has been noted by leading researchers. Hugo and Bell (1998: 111) emphasised the "...growing dichotomy" in "...population growth patterns and the economic trends which underlie them" between the more attractive rural areas experiencing counterurbanisation impulses and the "...heartland farming and pastoral areas" where "...population decline is common and there is consequent diminution in their social and economic potential".

In strategically-located and amenity-endowed regions, rural land is progressively valued not for its productive capacities (i.e. what it can grow and return in financial terms to the farmer or forester), but for its perceived aesthetic and status characteristics (i.e. as a positional good to be consumed). Hence, rugged coastal ranges are sought after for homesites overlooking the ocean and nearby ranges, while small towns and old dairy farms are desired for their heritage and 'working countryside' ambience along with their close proximity and access to large regional centres. In other words, settlement and land use in such locations are driven more by 'consumption' values than by production ones (Holmes, 2006).

Smailes et al. (2005) also found rural amenity to be a powerful influence over the growing heterogeneity of rural communities, especially those in the mixed agricultural and coastal zones. In particular, high rural amenity was strongly and positively correlated with recent in-migration, total population growth, industrial

diversity and ageing populations, and strongly negatively correlated with younger age structures and agriculture's proportional share of the local workforce (Smailes et al. 2005). Following up on this research, Argent et al.'s (2007) multivariate rural amenity index explained (in a statistical sense) a substantial proportion of the variance in in-migration rates during the two intercensal periods of 1976-1981 and 1996-2001.

The most comprehensive appraisals of the regionally differentiated impacts of amenity values have been undertaken by Barr in his enquiry into regional structural differences in Australian agriculture for the National Land and Water Audit (Barr 2002) and, in greater detail, in his study of rural Victoria's 'social landscapes' (Barr 2005). Barr (2002: 107) observed that:

"Currently, demand for landscape amenity is a major influence upon the pattern of structural change in Australian agriculture. The influence is manifest in the high price of land in the more amenable and accessible parts of the rural landscape. These higher land prices restrict the capacity of agriculture to adjust to maintain competitiveness and inexorably drive the path of adjustment to a non-commercial agricultural future."

Of particular value is his depiction of the 'rural amenity landscape', which is focused on an examination of the pivotal role of what he terms the 'amenity premium' in entrenching the presence and retention of undersized farms, facilitating and even requiring pluriactivity (i.e. the creation of new on-farm or off-farm income streams) and part-time farming. In his Australia-wide study, Barr (2004) notes that farm incomes in the strict sense are generally lower in amenity landscape areas than in production ones, but that farm family incomes are higher, since, in such areas, they are tied to a higher component of (earned or unearned) off-farm income. Furthermore, the rate of decline of farmer numbers is lower than that in the 'agricultural heartland'. In contrasting these two landscapes, Barr (2005: 68) comments that, "... a consolidation of the division of rural Australia into high amenity and low amenity locations" seems to be occurring.

Local and regional land markets are key 'agents of change' in this regionalisation process, pricing different commercial and socio-economic activities into and out of land ownership. Barr's (2005) notion of the 'amenity premium' is approximated by calculating the ratio of land value to gross value of production per hectare. In such conditions, conventional broad acre farming enterprises cannot compete for land with the relatively price-inelastic tastes and desires of ex-urban people on drought-proof and international commodity market-proof incomes (Barr 2005). Compared with the UK and New Zealand, Australia's spaciousness and the 'tyranny of distance' ensure a wide spectrum of locationally-induced, von Thünen-style land values, initially tied to production and marketing costs, although these are progressively being modified and frequently magnified by an amenity premium. Hence, this critical indicator of amenity can be seen as both an independent (indicating changes in the relative economic viability of farming, perhaps induced by changes in commodity prices or sectoral regulation) and a dependent variable (referring to the realisation of non-agricultural interests in agricultural land in select areas).

For some influential writers, therefore, rural Australia is bifurcating. Increasingly it is becoming polarised between dry, inland broad acre farming regions characterised by increasing economies of scale and higher levels of farm productivity, but ongoing demographic and economic decline with little hope of branching into new, and

possibly lucrative, income streams based on activities such as tourism, and well-watered, coastal and peri-urban fringe regions where above national average population growth occurs (based upon net migration gains) and agriculture forms a small, and declining, plank in regional employment and turnover (Hugo 2005). In summary, an understanding of the geography of the expression of these forces is central to appreciating how rural Australia is being changed, what these changes mean for the future economic, social and environmental development and sustainability of regions and communities, and what the policy implications of these changes might be.

### **3. The role of rural amenity**

While it is clear that high rates of rural in-migration are not simply the outcome of processes of counterurbanisation and gentrification, it does appear that many new arrivals, regardless of origin, favour certain parts of the countryside over others. Some of the major drivers are undoubtedly the employment and other economic opportunities offered by larger regional centres and the resources industries. However, the strength of migration to areas other than these suggests that landscape amenity may also play a key role. Even a superficial analysis of the spatial patterns suggests that areas with certain environmental and/or other geographical qualities are strongly associated with high rates of in-migration. To examine this further, we draw on the index of amenity developed by Argent et al. (2007) for south eastern Australia. This index draws together the following environmental and socio-economic variables: annual rainfall; terrain and altitude; remoteness; duration of settlement; irrigation water resources; distance from the beach; and, employment in recreation and related services.

Following McGranahan (1999), an amenity index was created using z-scores of only those independent variables that are significant predictors of in-migration rates. A thorough discussion of the amenity index, as well as the rationale for the inclusion of these particular variables is provided in Argent et al. (2007). This work showed a relatively strong statistical association between amenity and in-migration for the periods 1976-1981 and 1996-2001 achieving a multiple  $r$  of 0.73 and  $r^2$  of 0.53 when applied to their study area of south-eastern Australia. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising to find that this continued to be the case for the 2001-2006 intercensal period. In each state, and for the study area as a whole, rates of in-migration were strongly correlated with the amenity scores.

It is also notable that, although the broad analysis of the origins of in-migrants indicated that ex-metropolitan residents made up a relatively small proportion of new arrivals, the results suggest that high amenity areas are important to this group. In each state, the proportion of ex-metropolitan residents is highly correlated with amenity. In other words, those areas with a large proportion of ex-urban migrants also tend to be those with the highest levels of amenity. So, while ex-metropolitan residents may not dominate the in-migrant pool in such areas, it would seem they have a clear preference for these environments over lower amenity places.

These linkages between rural amenity and in-migration raise important issues for those communities experiencing an influx of new residents. As a number of researchers have pointed out, in-migration to high amenity environments has the potential to destroy the very attributes that have attracted many newcomers in the

first place. The combination of, inter alia, growing populations, land subdivision, new housing, and the expansion of commercial activity, present significant dilemmas for rural planners and policy makers. Moreover, the concomitant pressures on natural resources mean that amenity migration is a process that requires careful management if the broader goals of local and regional environmental sustainability, on the one hand, and harmonious residential and community development and land use, on the other, are to be met.

#### **4. Ecological consequences of amenity-led migration**

In many respects, rural amenity migration represents a deep structural shift for those communities affected by the process. In trying to understand this shift, social scientists have tended to focus their attention on issues associated with demographic change, economic restructuring, socio-cultural dynamics and political conflict. Yet, clearly, some of the most significant transformations associated with rural amenity migration will impact on the local environment. There is, for example, considerable evidence to suggest that amenity migration has direct impacts on vegetation, wildlife, streams and rivers, and coastal landforms (Jones et al. 2003, Gosnell et al. 2006, Klepeis et al. 2009, Mendham and Curtis 2009), although these impacts can be complex and both positive and negative. However, 'environment' needs to be interpreted broadly to incorporate not only 'natural' ecosystems, but also the cultural landscape. As a number of scholars have pointed out, the landscape values associated with traditional 'rural pursuits', such as agriculture, fishing and forestry, can be crucial components of amenity, and represent important elements of the heritage and attractiveness of high growth areas to locals and incomers alike (Rudzitis 1996, Barr 2003, Loeffler and Steinicke 2007).

One major driver of environmental change in amenity areas is land subdivision. This typically involves the subdivision of farms and other rural landholdings into smaller hobby farms and lifestyle properties. Alongside this is the expansion of existing settlements, to accommodate population growth and economic development (Bryant and Johnston 1992). From an ecological perspective, the central consequence of this process is landscape fragmentation (Knight et al. 1995). Those areas dominated by smallholdings also tend to be characterised by considerable diversity in land use, incorporating activities such as hobby farming and experimental agriculture, ecological restoration projects, fallow land, natural vegetation, and activities that even resemble light industry. The proliferation of small lots is often accompanied by a range of other developments, including new housing, sheds, access roads, power lines and fencing. All of this can serve to radically alter and fragment rural landscapes.

Just as there can be inconsistencies between the land uses and management practices of smaller landholders, similar problems can arise between more established industries and enterprises and new arrivals. The potential mismatch between these land uses and landscape sensibilities can lead to local social and political conflict (Hollier and Reid 2007). In the south-west of Western Australia, Schirmer (2007) noted considerable conflict between newcomers and other landowners over pesticide use. Much of this conflict was centred on the potential for agricultural and other pesticides to 'contaminate' neighbouring properties, despite the application of chemicals being a longstanding practice in these areas. Schirmer (2007) also noted concerns and conflicts regarding noise and heavy vehicle use of roads by farmers and timber companies.

The sometimes divergent views and motivations of established commercial landholders and new in-migrants can also be viewed in the declining viability of long-established rural institutions, such as farmers' associations and agricultural bureaux. In New South Wales, the Rural Lands Protection Board (RLPB) system provides an extensive regional network of 47 boards across rural NSW funded by local landowners' rates in order to safeguard livestock production against animal diseases and pest plants. In early 2009, the RLPB organisation underwent an extensive restructuring of its operations and management in response to a complex set of factors, one of which was the rising number of landholders in selected regions who objected to the compulsory RLPB levies and/or to the organisation's approach to land and animal management (IMC 2008).

From a broader environmental and aesthetic perspective, the fragmentation of landscape amenity also has the potential to erode the cultural attributes of places (Tonts and Greive 2002). In many rural areas, it is the broad acre agricultural and pastoral landscapes that form an intrinsic component of local heritage and landscape aesthetics (Woods 2005). Indeed, it is often these attributes that provide the stimulus for in-migration to rural areas. The breakup of farmland, the construction of housing and infrastructure and the introduction of new land uses can undermine the amenity of components of the landscape. Already in parts of the south-west of Western Australia, for example, have there been claims that some areas have become overdeveloped and now resemble parts of outer metropolitan Perth (Jones and Tonts 2003). In effect, the uniqueness of place has been eroded by suburban style development. Similar trends have also been reported in other parts of Australia (Gurran and Blakely 2007). From a conceptual point of view, there are similarities here to Butler's (1980) model of tourist area development. In rural amenity areas, such a perspective holds that, following initial 'discovery' and in-migration, ongoing development eventually leads to significant challenges for local planners amid claims of overdevelopment. On the one hand, planners are faced with the need to protect landscape amenity, and on the other, to continue to promote development.

A closely related set of challenges reflect the absolute loss of agricultural land. The process of land subdivision and conversion from agriculture to other uses necessarily results in a decrease in farm production. While it is individual farmers who generally make the choice to subdivide their properties in order to capitalise on the accumulated value of land, collectively there is often a concern that valuable agricultural land is being lost to the industry. The demand for land by newcomers, together with a cultural view among farmers, developers and planners that farming in particular areas has become less viable and will ultimately be supplanted has been described as the 'impermanence syndrome' in agriculture (Gallent et al. 2008). In response, some local authorities have initiated planning measures to protect agricultural land (Gibson et al. 2005). Of course, the problem with such measures is that they are sometimes seen as an infringement on private property rights, akin to disputes about heritage listing in high-amenity urban areas (Rosario 2007). Moreover, critics suggest that farmland preservation policies distort land prices by interfering with the market mechanism in the land economy, and can simply result in a transfer of demand and development to alternative locations.

While much of the literature has tended to focus on the negative impacts of amenity migration on rural environments, it is important to stress that the reality is far more complex. In research conducted in the United States, Jones et al. (2003) suggest

that the influx of new residents to amenity areas can contribute to 'greening' of local environmental values. They argue that, in contrast to the more utilitarian 'extractive-commodity' views of traditional rural residents, many newcomers are more focused on environmental protection and rehabilitation. Again, these differences have the potential to act as a source of social and political conflict within rural areas, and can present considerable challenges to planners and environmental managers.

The notion that newcomers might precipitate a shift in local environmental values has also been reported in Australia. In reflecting on research conducted in the Corangamite area of Victoria, Mendham and Curtis (2009) argued that new residents may not be bound to traditional land management practices. They claim such residents may have a stronger commitment to environmental stewardship than do many members of the traditional farming community, and that they can inject not only considerable enthusiasm, but also innovation and leadership. Not dissimilar findings were reported by Green (2003) in Perth's peri-urban arc. She found a high level of involvement by newcomers in local environmental groups, and argued that in many cases such residents had a stronger commitment to ecological restoration than did longstanding residents.

## **5. Conclusion**

The findings presented here raise important questions regarding the population turnarounds being experienced in some rural areas. While it is apparent that out-migration from metropolitan areas is part of the explanation for rural growth, it is part of a more complex story. Across much of rural Australia in-migration from metropolitan areas accounts for a relatively modest proportion of the new arrivals. Thus, the most significant source of in-migrants appears to be other rural/regional areas. This suggests that there is a need to understand high rates of in-migration in certain rural areas with reference to the exodus of people from other non-metropolitan places. In other words, contemporary migration patterns in rural Australia appear to be linked as much to population redistribution as counterurbanisation.

There are also important ramifications here for debates regarding rural gentrification. Most significant is the widely held view that it is an ex-urban population from higher socio-economic backgrounds that are redefining many rural spaces, as discussed above. While there is evidence to suggest that this might indeed be the case in selected locations, for the majority of places experiencing high rates of in-migration it would appear that change is being driven by quite different demographic groups. One of the apparent shortcomings of Australian research on this theme is that case studies have often been undertaken in localities where ex-urban residents do indeed represent the majority of new arrivals (Curry et al. 2001, Tonts and Greive 2002, Holmes et al. 2002, Costello 2007). Yet, the reality is that these places are quite atypical. This reinforces the view that caution is needed in applying the rural gentrification thesis in a broad and uncritical way, particularly in an Australian context.

The shortcomings of the urban-led rural gentrification thesis also apply to the welfare-led hypothesis. While it is likely that some lower income and/or welfare dependent ex-urban people comprise some of the new arrivals in rural areas, the extent to which such groups have contributed to broader patterns of in-migration,

over the past intercensal period at least, is doubtful. The modest flows of people from the metropolitan areas to most of the more remote, high in-migration SLAs suggest that it might explain only a small component of the influx.

The perception of some rural areas as being desirable has always been an axiomatic driver of in-migration and the resulting in-migration has, equally axiomatically, led to local demographic and environmental change. That amenity-led migration in rural Australia should be having these effects is therefore unsurprising. What is perhaps more surprising is the inherent complexity and diversity of this current process. Australia's initial agricultural settlers may well have been influenced by the traditional cachet that land ownership bestowed in European society, but their primary motivations were economic and they were therefore focused on the productive potential of the land on which they settled. Even when they competed for land (as did the squatters and the selectors in the late nineteenth century) (Williams 1975, Powell 1988) the motivations of these two groups were both similar and mutually comprehensible.

Many contemporary, amenity-led migrants may also be seeking a living, or at least some form of financial gain, but nowadays the motivations for their moves are far more likely to also encompass lifestyle and aesthetics. In spatial terms, this causes such migrants to focus only on those subsections of rural Australia with the requisite accessibility and/or landscape attributes. This produces a dichotomy at the sub-regional scale between those growing localities that possess and those stable or declining localities that lack these desirable characteristics.

What this means for the areas experiencing amenity-led in migration is that their populations are becoming increasingly diversified. Characteristically, a (shrinking) traditional rural population remains. This demographic cohort is likely to be aging, predominantly Anglo-Celtic and to have ongoing socioeconomic links to the local productive/extractive industries. As this paper indicates, the in-migrants are less likely to be a homogenous group. They are not necessarily from the capital cities nor are they all seriously rich – or seriously poor. If they share any characteristic, it is, almost by definition, that they are attracted to a perceived environment and lifestyle that they valorise.

The inherent paradox in this situation is an all too common characteristic of amenity-led migration flows. The migrants are attracted to an environment as it is. But, not only do they change these environments by moving into them, they also fail to perceive that such environments are constantly changing and that their perceptions are therefore likely to be both idealised and nostalgic. In other words, many in- migrants wish to preserve the bucolic surface of the areas that they colonise (Jones 2002) even as they change its productive agricultural substance. This situation poses clear policy challenges for those entrusted with the governance of high amenity rural areas as they attempt to deal with, on the one hand, the grounded issues of settlement, land use and environmental management and, on the other, the different visions and aspirations of an increasingly diversified local population.

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**RURAL AMENITY AND RURAL CHANGE IN TEMPERATE AUSTRALIA:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY**

***Summary***

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many rural areas in the developed world are experiencing planning and development challenges related to complex processes of population change. It is our contention that the nature, direction and regional manifestations of these changes are strongly related to varying levels of local amenity. Amenity levels both result from the qualities of the local social, economic and physical environments and contribute to the ability of rural regions to attract and retain prospective and established residents. In turn, the presence, absence or nature of these attractive forces are likely to engender development challenges related to growth, decline or (where the attractive – or repellant - forces are demographically specific) social mix. In this paper, we will report on the provisional findings of a study of the ecumene of temperate mainland Australia (the states of New South Wales, South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia). For this area, we used a range of demographic, economic and environmental data sources, including migration flows, to construct an amenity index and to develop an amenity classification of nearly 500 social catchments. In later phases of this project, we will be conducting more detailed and localised studies in high and low amenity areas to identify both the planning and the socioeconomic implications of recent amenity-led migration.