Rural Destinations & their Uneven Development: How Well Do Amenities Explain Spatial Patterns?

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Summary

Rural communities across the United States have experienced a shift away from more traditional economic base activities like agriculture, forestry, mining, and manufacturing toward a more service oriented economic base related to attracting in-migrants, seasonal residents, and/or tourists. Still, while many rural communities serve as rural destinations, destination development is uneven across rural America exhibiting spatial clustering in particular areas. Prior research suggests that rural amenities (natural amenities, recreational infrastructure, wilderness areas, etc.) attract people to particular places, thus explaining this spatial patterning. This study examines the extent to which natural, socially produced, and urban amenities explain the spatial distribution of rural destinations and the degree to which relationships between these amenities and rural destinations vary across space. I argue that features that serve as amenities attracting people to place are not static or universally understood to be attractive, but rather vary culturally over time and across space. In other words, it is our social interpretation of place that makes places attractive, and these interpretations are socially constructed so that a feature that is attractive in one region at a certain time may not be as attractive in a different cultural context.

Data

Data are from Census 1990 and Census 2000, SF1 & SF3. Unit of analysis is the Census Place. This unit best represents the “community” level, as defined by Wilkinson (1990). It includes both incorporated places and census designated places. Only “rural” communities in the contiguous 48 states are included in the analysis. This excludes places with a population of 80,000 or more, places in metropolitan areas of 250,000 or more, & places with a high proportion of college dormitory, military, or correctional residents. Additional data include: McGranahan’s natural amenity index (1999); Johnson and Beale’s Nonmetropolitan Recreation Counties (2002); and data from ESRI on spatial location of wilderness areas, national parks and monuments, and commercial airports.

1: Rural Destinations are Unevenly Distributed across Space

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination Scale</th>
<th>% moved from metro area in last 5 years +</th>
<th>% of housing for seasonal or recreational use +</th>
<th>% of housing units valued at $200,000 or more</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| Weighted by reduced version of urban-rural continuum codes to weigh more remote places more heavily and reduce impact of exurbanization.

2: How Well Do Amenities Explain Spatial Patterns?

Three Types of Rural Amenities Serve as Explanatory Variables

### Natural Amenities

- Biophysical and fixed in space and time
- McGranahan’s Natural Amenity Index (1999)

**Socially Produced Amenities**

- Investment/Infrastructure by humans is required
- Johnson and Beale’s Nonmetro Recreation Counties (2002)

**Urban Amenities**

- Proximity to Urban life
- Proximity to Commercial Airport
- Proximity to City of 80,000 or more
- Proximity to City of 30 miles

### Explanatory Vars

- **Natural Amenities**
  - Nat Amenity Index
  - Wilderness
  - NP or Monument

- **Socially Produced Amenities**
  - Recreation Counties
  - Prox to Airport
  - Prox to City

### Urban Amenities

- Prox to Airport
- Prox to City

### Conclusions

Natural and socially produced amenities do help to explain the spatial distribution of rural destinations across the United States. In particular, tourism infrastructure (recreation counties), biophysical features of the natural world (natural amenity index), and proximity to designated wilderness areas explain the uneven development of rural destinations at Census 2000. Still, relationships between these key variables and rural destinations vary across space, suggesting that our social interpretations of what features serve as “amenities” likely vary across space with culture.

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