

The Third Coast Impacts of Amenity Migration

We are not alone. Hundreds of mountain communities in countries around the world – from Cambodia to Costa Rica to Spain to mountainous regions in the US, Mexico, and Canada – are experiencing a phenomenon unknown a decade or two ago. As expensive oceanfront fills up with migrants, those who cannot afford to be there are seeking out the next hottest real estate markets on the planet; the mountains. Mountain regions have become the world's desirable new coasts – Dr. Laurence Moss, who runs the International Amenity Migration Center in Spokane, describes the mountains in North America as the third coast. Dr. Moss studies the phenomenon as part of a larger global trend called amenity migration. At the Columbia Basin Trust's excellent (and free) Change and Sustainability Forum held in Castlegar last weekend, Dr. Moss documented the profile of a typical amenity migrant, how the phenomena is affecting communities, what we have to expect as mountain-based communities and what some communities have done so that it hasn't eaten them up.

Amenity migrants arrive looking for natural and cultural amenities. Dr. Moss calls these 'motivators' (anybody who has lived in the Kootenays for any length of time or hangs around at local coffee shops could rattle off many of these): a more leisurely pace, a refuge from increasing global uncertainties like violence and climate change, metro living conditions, and opportunities for learning, personal and spiritual development. With the rapid population growth typically associated with this first wave of migrants (NOTE: the Kootenays has not yet experienced the large population growth of many of these areas), the lifestyle migrants are quickly followed by more opportunistic economic migrants and capital ("there's gold in them thar hills").

There's a whole series of other factors that act as 'facilitators' allowing this migration to happen as never before: access technology - not just revolutions in information communication but better roads and airport connections, a huge increase in discretionary wealth, access to available land (although this is being reduced), more discretionary time, comfort amenities (specialized physicians, clubs and nice restaurants) and a reduced socio-cultural rootedness in society (we're less and less tied to one place).

These migrants build bigger homes on bigger lots. The average lot size in Teton County, Wyoming has grown from 1.2 hectares to 14 hectares in the last decade or so. And these places are growing fast. In the U.S., mountain areas grew almost twice the rate as areas that were experiencing economic booms. In Canada, Canmore grew by 76% between 1991 and 2001. Pemberton (outside Whistler) doubled.

Typically, the migrants have a higher level of education and many have a higher income. However, many do not, and are forced to eke out a marginal existence, underemployed in an area where the cost of living – fuelled mainly by the exploding cost of housing – is prohibitive. Some new migrants tap into the 'outside' world for their incomes using e-commerce and the digital economy. However, for many, the economic reality (we call it the Kootenay shuffle here) causes a high turnover, with many having to leave.

The effect on real estate of these migrants has been substantial – in Flathead County, Montana prices have tripled in 16 years from \$64,000 in 1990 to \$204,000 in 2006. In Teton County, Wyoming, the median house clocks in at \$539,000, a 400% increase in that same period. In Nelson, the Kootenay Real Estate Board reported the median price in the city to be \$315,000 for the first 9 months of 2007, much higher than the mid-to-low \$100s of a decade ago.

The two biggest community impacts Dr. Moss reports is the clash in values between new and old and the slow response of local officials to deal with the sprawling growth and the effects of it, most notably the housing affordability situation.

Solutions? Dr. Moss believes that we need local empowerment in a regional context. We have to act regionally without giving up totally on local autonomy. He also calls for local governments and planners to be more proactive and to get ahead of the curve; you know it will come so be prepared. Moss also calls for the shifting of our values so that ecological concerns and ecosystems are considered paramount, framing all our economic and social decisions. This means densifying, deliberate planning in our communities for the reduction of the automobile, taking food security issues more seriously (e.g. having more food grown locally) and looking ahead to the implications of the inevitable peak oil crisis (China, the US and other heavy industrial users are using more and more while less and less is being found).

Very few local governments in North America have been able to do this well, despite some great plans and strategies. What they lack says Dr. Moss is determination and backbone; elected officials back down from the bold commitments made in the plans and strategies. We need to look to Europe to see examples where communities have been successful in this. Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium and Austria have all managed to strike a balance keeping high quality rural services (schools and health services) and encouraging the maintenance of a steady state – like establishing a maximum lot size and encouraging an economy and culture that supports local food production - not heeding to the mantra of unchecked growth.

Can we?