



Super-rich landowners in social-ecological systems: Opportunities in affective political ecology and life course perspectives

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Affect
Conservation
Environmental governance
High-net worth
Land management
Land ownership
Life course
Property regimes

ABSTRACT

The world's wealthiest individuals own an increasingly large portion of the world's rural agricultural land and through their ownership, assume unprecedented control over ecosystem processes and biodiversity. This critical review considers recent geographic scholarship and its implications for gaining traction in understanding high net worth (HNW) owners as critical components of complex social-ecological systems. Though scholars have begun to question the role of the super-rich in systems of environmental management, questions remain about how HNW individuals influence and shape rural communities and ecologies over time. This review identifies HNW landowners as key constituents of social-ecological system dynamics and examines how they change with the ecological and social systems in which they operate through feedbacks that are unique to the nature of ownership and management of extensive rural properties. To address literature gaps and motivate future work on HNW landownership and rural change, we offer a novel research framework and agenda that integrates affective political ecology and sociology's life course perspective through a social-ecological systems approach.

1. Introduction

From 2008 to 2017, the average number of acres held by the 100 largest landowners in the United States grew from 145,000 acres to 250,000 acres (The Land Report, 2018). Wealthy individuals have long shaped rural societies and environments. However, the surge of financial capital into rural land markets worldwide facilitated by high net worth (HNW) individuals since the 1990s has brought new attention to the scale and implications of the extensive rural land holdings of HNW landowners—an emerging geography of the “super-rich” related to global land grab dynamics (Hay, 2013). Their growing presence across vast geographic spaces means that today's HNW landowners have new levels of individual influence in social-ecological systems. The potential impacts of this phenomenon raise questions about the motivations and actions of this demographic group. In many cases, HNW buyers of land aspire to more than a sound investment or production opportunity and report emotional and affective connections to a particular aesthetic. For example, when entrepreneurs Kris and Doug Tompkins purchased over 2.2 million acres in Chile and Argentina to hasten the pace of biodiversity conservation because of the region's ‘haunting soulfulness’ (Bonnefoy, 2018), or when media mogul Ted Turner aspires to ‘living in harmony with nature’ and restores native ecosystems on his vast American landholdings (Turner

Enterprises, Inc., 2019), their actions suggest complex personal rationales for landownership. The association of large properties with status and value in elite classes is well-documented historically (Veblen, 1899/1998). Yet little is known about what material experiences, social networks, affective impulses, mental models, and philosophies shape land use and management approaches among the contemporary super-rich and, by extension, what this emergent regime means for critical conservation areas and rural landscapes worldwide.

This critical review considers recent geographic scholarship and its implications for gaining traction in understanding HNW owners as crucial components of complex social-ecological systems. In reviewing literature that examines the lives and lifestyles of HNW individuals (Hay, 2013; Hay and Beaverstock, 2016), as well as their role as owners of rural amenity properties (Gosnell and Abrams, 2011), we highlight a key knowledge gap involving the evolutionary and relational dynamics of HNW landowners and HNW property systems. In response, we propose a framework that integrates insights from social-ecological systems, sociology, and affective political ecology to provide a longitudinal and system-driven approach for studying wealthy individuals and their influence on rural communities and ecologies.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2019.05.007>

Received 21 February 2019; Received in revised form 23 April 2019; Accepted 10 May 2019

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2. Social and environmental dimensions of HNW landownership

Recent work from geographers concerning the super-rich focuses on exposing the outrageous and sometimes peculiar aspects of their lives and lifestyles: for example, their luxury consumption patterns, the insular nature of their elite social networks, and their penchant for secrecy and isolation (McManus, 2013; Holmes, 2011; Davis and Monk, 2008). A related body of research has begun to track the adoption of boutique environmental causes by celebrities and wealthy, influential individuals (Brockington, 2009), and to examine how this trend has transitioned rural landscapes into sites of contested sustainability initiatives (Marsden, 2016). As landlords in critical conservation areas, HNW individuals frequently bring enthusiasm for land uses and practices that espouse lofty social and environmental goals (e.g., conservation easements or the restoration of endangered species). As a complication to a narrative of altruism, however, Davison (2016) describes these environmental efforts as a type of “drawbridge sustainability,” where wealthy landowners create exclusive eco-paradises in order to seek out “private redemption through conservation” (2016: 353). This critique aligns with others who argue that the philanthropic activities of the super-rich typically support social systems and causes that reproduce their elite status and perpetuate hard class distinctions (Giridharadas, 2019).

By asking more than “who” and “where” the super-rich are, the literature described above begins to answer the question of *how* wealthy individuals shape the world around them (Hay and Beaverstock, 2016). Still needed, however, especially from the perspective of human-environment studies, is greater attention to material transformations in rural communities and of rural ecologies and to the role of the super-rich as dynamic agents of change in social-ecological systems (Folke et al., 2005). Nowhere do wealthy individuals exert more direct influence in this capacity than as owners of extensive, rural properties.

2.1. HNW landowners: An unique subset of amenity migrants

Geographic scholarship on wealthy individuals as rural landowners typically constitutes a subset of studies of amenity migration, the phenomenon involving the relocation of those with increased wealth and mobility to rural places in search of improved quality of life and natural and cultural amenities (Abrams et al., 2012). To understand the significance of rural amenity migration, scholarship has often focused on associating types of landowners with categories of different land use values and management strategies. Studies have shown that rural landowners can differ by their economic orientation vis-à-vis ownership (amenity, investor, developer) and by their stewardship ethics and management strategies (Gosnell and Travis, 2005; Gill et al., 2010). Importantly, the literature typically distinguishes new owners of large rural properties by their interest in and capacity to implement resource management approaches that differ from the conventions of production-based agricultural systems (Gosnell et al., 2007).

Scholarship focused on ownership type provides an opportunity to track patterns of changing demographics across rural landscapes where new ownership regimes can instigate significant changes, such as a shift from production-based to multifunctional landscapes (Holmes, 2006). However, a preoccupation with categorizing landowners – through either survey work or typologies – limits the focus of the amenity canon to characterizing static moments in time (Sorice et al., 2018). Observations of amenity-driven landscape change are similarly temporally fixed and often bounded to the property level. In contrast, a social-ecological systems (SES) perspective suggests that HNW landowners can influence social-ecological processes at a landscape scale, shifting resource governance practices and producing new rural ecologies (Haggerty and Travis, 2006). Furthermore, though characteristics of emergent rural HNW property regimes likely correspond with those of amenity-driven rural gentrification (Gosnell and Abrams, 2011), a key distinction between an HNW property regime driven by extensive

agricultural landholdings and other gentrified rural and amenity landscapes is the disproportionate role that individual landowners play in landscape-scale social-ecological processes. These limitations suggest a need to approach HNW landowners as unique within the amenity migration and rural gentrification literature: as landowners who are differentiated by their capacity to exert influence across vast geographic territory and therefore as especially interesting from the perspective of how and why their approaches and values change over time.

2.2. Land management and the life course

Life course theory is an established perspective in sociology that connects the course of individual lives to social context and broader structural social and economic developments (Elder et al., 2003). In life course theory, *trajectories* describe the sequence of roles and experiences in individual lives that evolve at the nexus of individual choice and institutional and social forces. Individual life trajectories are punctuated by *transitions*, when developments in a state or role (such as leaving home, marriage, or retirement) can precipitate major shifts in identity or social status. In addition, life course theorists observe *turning points*, when individual trajectories undergo substantial changes in direction, often antithetical to standard patterns or rules of social pathways, such as, starting a new career late in life.

Insights from other ethnographic examinations of the super-rich suggest that the socio-cultural and economic context of the HNW life course has unique dimensions that may be consequential for land management and ownership trajectories. For example, while certain HNW individuals who use real estate as part of their investment portfolio may find rural properties fungible in times of market volatility, the wealthiest members of the super-rich have been found to be impervious to downturns and recessions (Hay, 2013). While all landowners likely leverage social networks for advice about land management, Harrington suggests that wealthy individuals seek out sources of advice particular to their wealth and status, such as personal wealth managers (Harrington, 2016). And while the basic transitions that are important from the perspective of land management may be similar for all landowners (e.g., divorce or death), the unique ways that HNW individuals experience turning points through the learned experience of taking on stewardship of vast landscapes (often for the first time) merits special consideration.

A recent and promising convergence between human-environment studies and the sociological theory of the life course provides a way to describe and explain social-ecological change in the context of social history. In their examination of woody plant encroachment in Texan rangelands, Hurst et al. (2017) employ a conceptual approach that integrates life course theory with a SES perspective to trace how macro phenomena, such as structural changes in the agricultural economy and social norms about hunting, as well as household level social dynamics, including divorce and ranch succession, instigate shifts in land management, outlook, and behavior.

Hurst et al.'s (2017) foray into life course is representative of a growing interest across the human-environment literature in how landowners and the social-ecological systems they inhabit change over time. In its current iteration, however, the social-ecological dynamics of the landowner life course are unidirectional: social changes happen to landowners and result in tangible outcomes on the landscape. A SES perspective should recognize multi-directional relationships and interconnected feedbacks; yet this is largely lacking from both the life course and SES literature. What is needed is a careful approach for analyzing the influence of non-humans and aspects of the natural world on socio-emotional and behavioral change in humans—particularly in the context of HNW ownership in which the idiosyncratic and non-standardized experience has profound influence at scale. Here, emerging work from critical geographers on affect offers a potential strategy.

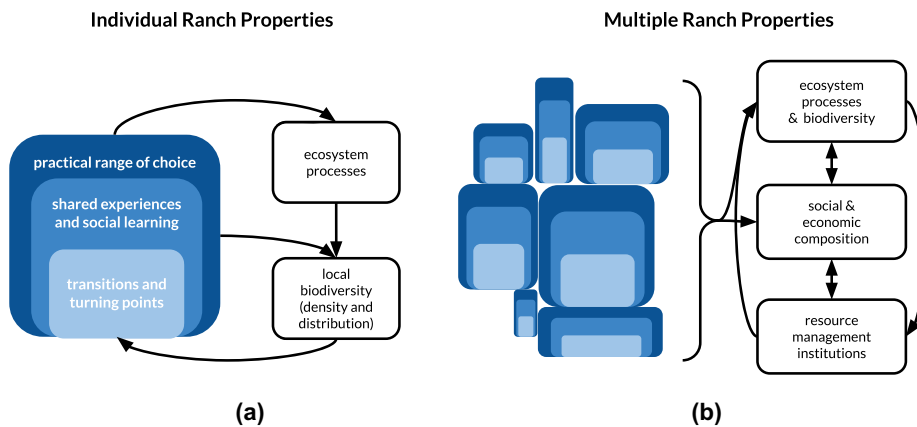


Fig. 1a and 1b. The P-LLC Framework. The property life course (a) views HNW property ownership as an evolutionary phenomenon with distinct trajectories, where life course and ecological dynamics interact to influence the owner's "practical range of choice" about ranch property management (White, 1961). At the property scale, the practical range of choice of HNW landowners evolves with one's life course and the social-ecological experiences that connect people to social and ecological networks – which can take the form of networked or affective experiences (Lorimer, 2016). We conceptualize these social-ecological experiences and encounters as opportunities for social learning and transformative change associated with management values and practices (Pahl-Wostl, 2009). At the landscape scale (b), property regimes influence local social

and economic systems through changes in land use and management and social network experiences and interactions. We theorize that HNW landownership dynamics at the landscape scale then influence environmental and natural resource governance and biophysical composition of the landscape. For example, American West HNW landowners that block public hunting on their private lands quickly find that their properties serve as safe harbors for large concentrations of game animals; which results in significant public conflict and challenges the administrative capacity of wildlife management agencies (Haggerty and Travis, 2006).

2.3. Affective political ecology and natural resource management

As part of the post-structural turn, multiple lineages of critical theory have embraced the role of affect in mediating human behavior and change (Anderson, 2006). Affective political ecology applies the concept of affect to natural resource management and demonstrates how encounters between humans and non-humans result in new socio-natural relationships and subjectivities, ethics relating to stewardship and care, and management orientations (cf., Singh, 2013). A focus on the phenology of affect adds to Hurst et al.'s (2017) landowner life course by positioning HNW landowners and the beliefs and strategies they enact on rural properties as co-constituted by social and biophysical processes while simultaneously acknowledging the role of HNW landowners as core nodes in and as co-evolving with complex SES. At the same time, the focused ethnographic nature of an affect-oriented life course study responds to realities within the larger political economy of land ownership, namely that HNW property regimes comprise an increasing small cohort of wealthy individuals amassing control over increasingly large and ecologically consequential areas.

3. The P-LLC framework and research agenda: Linking affect and life course approaches

This review examined literature addressing wealthy individuals and their roles as consequential agents of rural landscape change and identified research gaps concerning the social-ecological evolutionary dynamics of HNW landowners and HNW property regimes. To motivate future research, we propose the Property-Landscape Life Course (P-LLC), a longitudinal, systems-based framework for investigating social-ecological implications of HNW landowners and HNW property regimes (Fig. 1a and b). The P-LLC organizes data collection activities at the property and landscape-scale to describe and characterize the dynamics of HNW landowners and the rural communities and ecologies they inhabit through space and time.

Organizing research activities around the P-LLC provides both theoretical and practical advancements for studies involving the geographies of the super-rich. The integration of critical geography perspectives, such as affective political ecology, with a SES framing, is an oft-described yet seldom realized union (Cote and Nightingale, 2012). By mobilizing affect as a component of SES dynamics, the P-LLC provides an opportunity for theories from critical geography to fruitfully engage with ecology, land system science, and complex systems theory. Here, multidisciplinary collaborations built around the P-LLC could add a missing perspective to the search for conservation interventions focused on emerging threats to ecological integrity in many critical conservation areas. Linking property

ownership trajectories with rural landscape change and identifying important feedbacks advances a broader dialogue about transition and transformation in environmental governance systems, along with potential pathways to future social-ecological transformation in the context of HNW property regimes. Lastly, research organized around the P-LLC supports continued investigations into the dynamics of rural change while providing an innovative common platform for assessing the increasing influence of the super-rich as proprietors of natural resources in settler societies globally.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Paul Cross for research guidance and suggestions and to Megan Bowen for feedback and editing on earlier versions of the manuscript.

Funding

Funding for this research was provided by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 1832452, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and the Buffalo Bill Cody Center of the West Research Fellowship.

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