


Amenity Migration and Community Wellbeing in Washington's Kittitas County Post-COVID-19 Pandemic[☆]

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ABSTRACT Amenity migration in the Intermountain West is a rapidly evolving process that has greatly impacted wellbeing in many rural communities over the past several decades. While the impacts of amenity migration have been discussed through both individual community case studies and cross-community comparative analysis, there is an ongoing need for research that continues to build upon our understanding of amenity migration's effects on individual and community wellbeing. Remote and hybrid work opportunities, expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic, have allowed for an increasing number of people to live part or full-time in highly desirable rural locations, particularly those proximate to larger urban areas. In this paper, we discuss the historical and current trends of amenity migration in Kittitas County, proximate to Seattle, Washington, on the eastern slope of the Cascade Mountains. Drawing upon perspectives shared in 80 interviews with key informants and community members about community wellbeing in three towns, we discuss the implications of amenity migration for the perceived quality of life of both longer-term residents and newer community members. Additionally, the setting and scope of this research allows for comparison between high-amenity rural communities with larger recreation economies, and adjacent less—amenity-based rural communities. Findings indicate that amenity migration continues to evolve and impact community wellbeing, primarily via community cultural changes and socioeconomic and housing inequality. However, there are nuanced geographical and longitudinal differences in the impacts of amenity migration. Additionally, participants perceived an increase in amenity migration patterns and impacts in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic. To conclude, we discuss ongoing and potential initiatives that may help support community wellbeing, as well as possibilities

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for further improvements in policy and planning to equitably increase the quality of life for all residents.

Introduction

Social scientists have long been interested in the relationships between rural communities and the natural environment that surrounds them. Many rural communities are understood to be natural resource dependent—or highly reliant economically on extractive or non-extractive natural resource use, although this dependence can vary quite drastically on a case-by-case basis (Freudenburg 1992; Freudenburg and Gramling 1994; Krannich et al. 2014; Mueller 2021; Peluso, Humphrey, and Fortmann 1994; Winkler et al. 2007). Some rural communities are dependent on natural resource extraction, such as logging or mining (Brown, Dorins, and Krannich 2005; Freudenburg 1992; Krannich et al. 2014), whereas others are more dependent on non-extractive natural resource relationships such as tourism and outdoor recreation (Stiman 2020; Ulrich-Schad 2015; Winkler et al. 2007). While a place may have both types of industry present at the same time, or even transition from one to the other, the general characteristics of communities with a dominant industry on either end of the extractive vs. non-extractive continuum have been shown to be different (Gosnell and Abrams 2011; Pilgeram 2021; Sherman 2018).

Research on communities that are mostly reliant on non-extractive natural resource dependence has used the concept of amenity migration, broadly conceptualized as an influx of in-migration to a place based upon its desirable natural environment, proximity to outdoor opportunities, and idyllic rural setting (Brehm, Eisenhauer, and Krannich 2004; Gosnell and Abrams 2011; Pilgeram 2021; Sherman 2018). Case studies on communities that have transitioned from an extractive economy to a mostly non-extractive natural resource relationship have shown that this transition can come with many challenges for rural communities (Farrell 2020; Park and Pellow 2011; Pilgeram 2021; Sherman 2021; Winkler 2013). Some of these difficulties can include rising housing prices and cost of living, cultural differences between longer tenured residents and newcomers, gentrification, and a sense of loss among people who yearn for their past ways of life (Farrell 2020; Kondo, Rivera, and Rullman 2012; Park and Pellow 2011; Pilgeram 2021; Sherman 2021; Smith and Krannich 2000; Ulrich-Schad and Qin 2018; Winkler 2013; Winkler, Deller, and Marcouiller 2015).

Communities that have undergone these transitions are often located in areas across the American Mountain West, Great Lakes region, and rural Northeast (Haggerty et al. 2022; Stedman 2006; Stiman 2020; Winkler 2013; Winkler et al. 2007). However, this trend has been so profound in the Mountain West that many have adopted the terminology of “Old West vs. New West” to describe the seemingly stark contrast between communities reliant on traditional economies based around ranching, mining, or logging and those that have emergent tourism or recreation economies (Otterstrom and Shumway 2023; Winkler et al. 2007). Additionally, this dichotomy is not limited to the industries that fuel economic activity in communities, the Old West vs. New West divide is also thought of as including differences in socio-political beliefs, socioeconomic class, and a host of other contributors that can create vast cultural differences between “old-timers” and “newcomers” in communities impacted

by amenity migration (Armstrong and Stedman 2013; Hunter, Boardman, and Onge 2005; Kondo et al. 2012; Ulrich-Schad and Qin 2018).

While trends in amenity migration have been discussed in research dating back to the late 20th century, the landscape of amenity migration continues to evolve over time (Sherman 2021; Ulrich-Schad 2015). Technology has made it even easier for white collar workers to move from metropolitan areas to rural communities in the 21st century, allowing wealthier individuals to bring their jobs and forms of capital with them to a new location (Ahmed, Eklund, and Fry 2021; Wildermuth 2022). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has been shown to have increased rural in-migration in counties with desirable amenities and outdoor recreation (Petersen and Winkler 2022; Petersen, Winkler, and Mockrin 2024; Wildermuth 2022). Remote work opportunities coupled with the desire for easy access to natural amenities is just one hypothesis for why many Americans appeared to have an increased attraction to rural communities during and after the pandemic. The additional mobility provided to some professionals through expanded remote work opportunities is likely exacerbating the telecommuting impacts already experienced by some high-amenity locales (Krannich, Petrzalka, and Brehm 2006). However, qualitative research on the true lived realities of non-extractive natural resource dependent rural communities in the aftermath of the pandemic is still lacking, understandably so due to the difficulty of conducting qualitative research, particularly that which is community-engaged, during COVID-19.

Through an examination of community member experiences in a county in Central Washington (Figure 1) with historical presence of both extractive and non-extractive natural resource industries, we hope to contribute to the understanding of how amenity migration is evolving in the 21st century, particularly post-pandemic. In 2023, our research team conducted 80 interviews with community members in three towns in Kittitas County, Washington. These interviews were broadly focused on understanding community wellbeing, and it became apparent early in the research

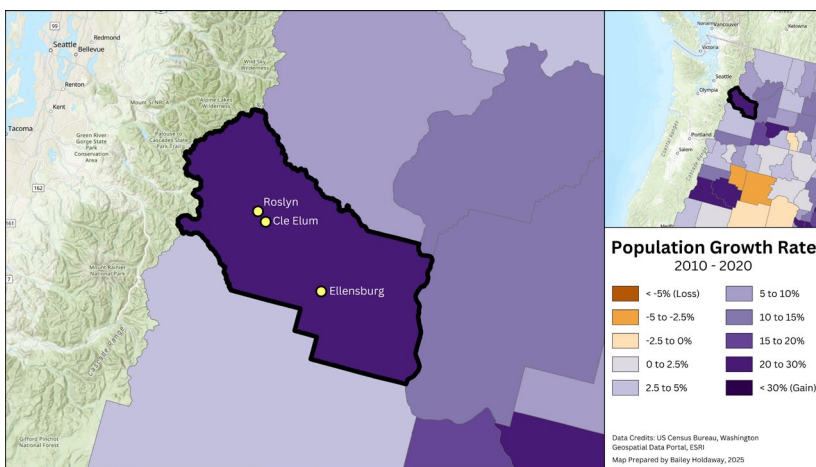


Figure 1. 2010–2020 Population Growth Rate by County (Flint et al. 2023). Dataset and map boundaries extend to Intermountain West only.

process that amenity migration was a key factor that has impacted community life for decades, and continues to do so. While the research team already planned to center discussions of demographic transitions as a key theme in interviews on community wellbeing, these questions were elevated to a primary topic of conversation for interviews with community members in Kittitas County. Particularly in the “Upper County” region surrounding the towns of Roslyn and Cle Elum, transitions from coal mining and logging to non-extractive economic dimensions has brought both benefits and challenges to long-time community members. Additionally, the mid-sized college town of Ellensburg in lower Kittitas County, which has greater ties to agriculture, is seen as an emergent amenity migrant location by some. Understanding population change dynamics in each of these communities through comparing and contrasting differences in participant perspectives illuminates insights into how communities can plan for amenity migration moving forward in a modern social, political, and economic landscape.

This paper aims to address the following questions (1) How do people in Kittitas County perceive amenity migration as influencing community wellbeing? (2) What are the perceived differences in how processes of amenity migration impact wellbeing in Upper County as compared to Ellensburg? (3) What (if any) are the perceived differences in amenity migration in the years immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic? Each of these research questions highlights an area of discussion in research participant narratives that we believe is important to understand for forward looking discussions on overall community wellbeing in Kittitas County, other high-amenity locations, and the broader field of lifestyle migration research.

Literature Review

Extractive vs. Non-Extractive Natural Resource Dependent Communities

Understanding previous research on amenity migration must first start with a discussion of historical classifications of natural resource dependent rural communities and their reliance on extractive or non-extractive industries (Freudenburg 1992; Freudenburg and Gramling 1994; Krannich et al. 2014; Mueller 2021; Peluso et al. 1994; Winkler et al. 2007). Extractive natural resource dependent communities are often centered around economic activity that stems from mining, energy development, logging, or other similar industries (Brown et al. 2005; Freudenburg 1992; Krannich et al. 2014). These places tend to go through boom-bust cycles, in which periods of rapid economic growth coincide with in-migration of workers, and economic downturns coincide with out-migration (Brown et al. 2005). Traditionally, natural resource extractive communities are thought to be largely inhabited by workers and their families who are specialized in a certain field, and may lack forms of cultural capital and intergenerational wealth typically held by white collar workers (Freudenburg and Gramling 1994).

Non-extractive natural resource dependent communities are more often reliant on tourism, outdoor recreation, the arts, or other adjacent industries (Mueller 2021; Winkler et al. 2007, 2016). These communities are often in

proximity to highly desirable natural amenities such as mountains, lakes, or public lands such as national parks (Beale and Johnson 1998). While non-extractive communities are not often thought of as going through the same boom-bust cycles as extractive communities, non-extractive places can face challenges such as high cost of living, wealth inequality, the presence of short-term rentals, and low and seasonal wages from jobs in service and tourism industries (Gosnell and Abrams 2011; Sherman 2018; Winkler 2013).

Many communities have transitioned from a reliance on extractive activities to non-extractive activities in the past several decades. This transition has been framed by some within a typological gradient from “New West” to “Old West,” and “New West” communities typically have close proximity to the abundant natural amenities resulting in in-migration and tourism in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Otterstrom and Shumway 2023; Winkler et al. 2007). Historical roots in extractive industries mean that there can be a stark contrast between long-time residents and newcomers, particularly in socioeconomic status and cultural backgrounds (Farrell 2020; Kondo et al. 2012; Park and Pellow 2011; Pilgeram 2021; Sherman 2021; Smith and Krannich 2000; Ulrich-Schad and Qin 2018; Winkler 2013; Winkler et al. 2015).

Kittitas County is an example of a place in which multiple communities have undergone this transition, and another is potentially in the midst of increased amenity migration. Roslyn and Cle Elum, two towns out of a handful that constitute “Upper County”, have a long history of mining and logging. However, the exodus of these industries, as well as Upper County’s proximity to the Cascade Mountains, resulted in population changes and increasing tourism in recent decades, with \$74.5 million now spent on tourism adjacent industries in Kittitas County each year (Kittitas County Chamber 2024). Ellensburg is historically reliant on agriculture, but has easy access to open spaces and natural beauty, and is only a 30 to 40-min drive from mountain recreation in Upper County. Many participants in this research noted that they believe more and more in-migrants are moving to Ellensburg because of the outdoor opportunities that it offers.

Amenity Migration and Community Wellbeing

The trends in population change and in-migration, as well as the historical and ongoing economic transitions happening in Kittitas County, necessitate an in-depth understanding of literature on “amenity migration.” Amenity migration can be loosely defined as the process in which people move to a community because of its proximity to desirable amenities and perceived lifestyle possibilities (Brehm et al. 2004; Gosnell and Abrams 2011; Pilgeram 2021; Sherman 2018). Amenity migrants are frequently thought to be wealthier individuals with the means to purchase homes or land in their new community, and can often carry different cultural values than many long-time residents (Farrell 2020; Kondo et al. 2012; Park and Pellow 2011; Pilgeram 2021; Sherman 2021; Smith and Krannich 2000; Ulrich-Schad and Qin 2018; Winkler 2013; Winkler et al. 2015).

In the literature on amenity migration, these differences are understood to sometimes bring about “culture clash” in communities experiencing an influx of lifestyle migrants. Culture clash can be conceptualized as real or perceived

differences in beliefs and values that impede things such as community interaction, planning, policy making, and can diminish overall community wellbeing (Armstrong and Stedman 2013; Hunter et al. 2005; Kondo et al. 2012; Ulrich-Schad et al. 2022; Ulrich-Schad and Qin 2018). However, not all communities experience this contention and research on culture clash shows the topic to be deeply nuanced (Smith and Krannich 2000). While cultural homogeneity in a community is not always desirable, a high degree of culture clash is often thought to hinder wellbeing outcomes on multiple levels (Kondo et al. 2012). In addition to lower levels of community cohesion, culture clash can also exacerbate divides in power dynamics in communities experiencing amenity migration, as the group(s) with the most political capital may not regularly interact with those outside their social circles (Smith and Krannich 2000; Ulrich-Schad and Qin 2018; Winkler 2013). Therefore, culture clash can have material implications for inequality in high-amenity communities that are already understood to be at risk for high costs of living (Pilgeram 2021; Sherman 2021; Winkler 2013). Additionally, high-levels of culture clash may exacerbate discrepancies in community goals between long-time residents and newcomers may result in one group's priorities reigning supreme over the others (Ulrich-Schad et al. 2022).

Amenity migration is also recognized as a process that could influence community wellbeing, through both culture clash and the economic impacts of wealthy in-migrants. Wellbeing itself can be broadly defined as anything that makes a "good life" (Bache and Reardon 2018), and community wellbeing is conceptualized by Larson et al. (2015) as the confluence of social, individual, and ecological wellbeing including the ability for people to work "together in pursuit of common interests." The interactional approach to community wellbeing theorizes that communities with a high-degree of interactional capacity have social networks in place that can help people and organizations respond to challenges, thus elevating the general quality of life in their community (Flint, Henderson, and Hensley 2024; Wilkinson 1991; Wilkinson et al. 1982). Interactional capacity may be hindered when a community is divided across socioeconomic, cultural, or political lines. Additionally, community wellbeing literature recognizes that oftentimes there is a minimum level of material wellbeing necessary for adequate social engagement and action (Wilkinson 1991). Thus, poverty and inequality can be seen as direct threats to community wellbeing even if some individuals in a community are financially well-off (Lancee and Van de Werfhorst 2012).

Although the exact processes are different, the labor market has impacted high-amenity communities just as it has had an impact on extractive natural resource dependent places (Farrell 2020; Pilgeram 2021; Sherman 2021; Ulrich-Schad 2015). The ability for many white collar workers to telework, work via a hybrid format, or travel long distances in short periods of time with advancements in transportation technologies, has allowed for increased mobility in wealthier populations (Farrell 2020; Pilgeram 2021; Sherman 2021). Second home owners have been a part of life in many high-amenity communities for a long period of time (Armstrong and Stedman 2013; Jennings and Krannich 2013; Stedman 2006; Stiman 2020), but this increase in mobility has allowed for even more people to spend considerable time

at a second home, or permanently relocate to a new community. While an influx in wealthier newcomers, part-time residents, or newcomers can result in socioeconomic inequality or culture clash, amenity migration can also lead to economic sustainability in some communities (Stiman 2020). Amenity migration can lead to job growth, greater diversity in viewpoints, and positive community development opportunities (Matarrita-Cascante 2017; Stiman 2020).

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic may have exacerbated these trends in mobility for some (Ahmed et al. 2021; Petersen and Winkler 2022; Petersen et al. 2024; Wildermuth 2022). Initial research suggests that rural communities in proximity to natural amenities may have seen an increase in population in the years that followed the pandemic (Petersen and Winkler 2022; Petersen et al. 2024; Wildermuth 2022). An increase in amenity migration in the 2020s even further as well as projections for continued growth (Kittitas County BoCC 2021) necessitates a greater understanding of the risks and benefits incurred by communities experiencing an influx of lifestyle migrants.

Methods

Research Site

This study is set in Kittitas County, Washington on the eastern slope of the Cascade Mountains, an approximately 60- to 90-min drive from the Seattle-Tacoma metropolitan area. Three towns in Kittitas County are the primary communities of focus, Roslyn, Cle Elum, and Ellensburg (Table 1). Roslyn and Cle Elum are part of what is colloquially referred to by locals as “Upper County,” a reference to the part of Kittitas County comprised largely of these two communities, but also including the smaller towns of Ronald and Easton, as well as the high-income resort communities Suncadia and Tumble Creek. Ellensburg lies further south in Kittitas County, is significantly larger in population, more reliant on agriculture, and also home to Central Washington University, the only 4-year university in Kittitas County.

Historically, Upper County was economically reliant on coal mining, logging, and railways. However, changes over time in both the logging and coal industries led to a declining local economy in the 1960s and 1970s. While coal mining and natural resource extraction remain significant parts of the local identity held by many long-time residents in Upper County, the area began to shift to a reliance on tourism, recreation, and part-time residents in the late 20th century. The planning and development of Suncadia in the 1980s is often referenced by locals as the critical turning point in Upper County’s transition from a community reliant on natural resource extraction to one reliant on non-extractive natural resource industries.¹ In the years that have followed, development and community life in

¹Suncadia is a development just outside of Cle Elum that includes large homes, a resort, and many other amenities for residents and visitors. Suncadia is perhaps best described in its own advertising language as “a mountain resort community that’s both close and away, just 90 minutes east of Seattle. Where you can be in nature, and true to yours. Mountain biking or sipping whiskey. On a fairway. In a kayak. Swimming in the spa pool. Or just taking in another sunny day (we have 200+ a year) on your gorgeous back patio” (Suncadia Real Estate 2024). Suncadia has been slowly built out since its establishment several decades ago, and Suncadia residents are often discussed by long-time Upper County community members as the epitome of amenity migrants.

Table 1. Demographic and Housing Profiles by County and Place

	Roslyn	Cle Elum	Ellensburg	Kittitas County
2020 population	950	2,175	18,666	44,337
2010 population	893	1,872	18,262	40,915
10-year growth rate	6.3%	16.2%	2.2%	8.4%
Median household income	64,500	56,645	53,730	66,800
% Non-Hispanic White	89.1%	83.9%	73.3%	79.7%
% Hispanic	4.9%	6.6%	13.4%	10.3%
Median gross rent	1,775	1,082	1,177	1,152
Median home value of owner-occupied units	429,600	347,300	346,700	417,600
Vacant housing units	36.7%	12.0%	6.7%	19.5%
Employed in agriculture, forestry, fishing & hunting, and mining	9.9%	2.4%	3.6%	4.9%
Employed in retail	34.2%	12.1%	11.3%	10.1%
Employed in arts, entertainment, recreation, services	22.8%	18.9%	17.9%	15.3%

Source: US Census Bureau (2020, 2022).

Upper County have been shaped by a growing number of seasonal residents, visitors, and higher income full-time newcomers that historically lived in Upper County for much of its history.

Ellensburg provides an interesting point of comparison for amenity migration research in Upper County. Ellensburg has historically been reliant on two main sources of economic activity, the timothy hay industry and Central Washington University. While these two areas of community life continue to hold a strong presence in both local culture and Ellensburg's economy, it became clear early on in our research process that Ellensburg may also be emerging as a newer amenity destination. Ellensburg is a larger community than all towns in Upper County, yet Ellensburg still experiences housing stress, in part because of its large student population. The agricultural history of Ellensburg and its relative lack of amenity related development when compared to neighboring communities allows for potentially new insights to occur regarding how diverse types of communities view and respond to amenity migration differently.

Research Protocol

This study emerges from a project aimed at qualitatively characterizing wellbeing in the Upper Yakima River Basin, defined as Kittitas County and its southerly neighbor, Yakima County.² In Kittitas County, 80 total interviews (Table 2) were conducted with key informants (KIs) (Krannich and Humphrey 1986) and general community

²Yakima County is significantly more dependent on agriculture than Kittitas County, and has not experienced the same historical or current patterns of amenity migration, resulting in our decision to focus solely on Kittitas County in this paper.

Table 2. Interview Totals by Community

	Upper County	Ellensburg	Kittitas County	Total
Government KI	3	3	6	12
Business KI	5	2	1	8
Non-government civic KI	9	7	3	19
Community member	24	17	0	41
Total (place)	41	29	10	80

Note: Cle Elum and Roslyn are grouped together under their regional moniker, Upper County. Key Informants grouped in Kittitas County self-identified as holding a county wide perspective, oftentimes due to their personal or professional positionality and involvement in multiple communities. Interviews with general community members were not conducted at the county level.

members on a range of topics related to general wellbeing, population and demographic change, local environmental conditions, food systems and agriculture, and anything else interviewees identified as salient topics for community life. In each community, interviews were conducted until saturation (Bailey 2017) was reached within and across demographics and community interest groups. The research team unanimously deemed that saturation had been reached when interviews were no longer yielding new insights, and further interviews would be an unnecessary stress on community member's time.

To begin our research process in the area, we conducted two scoping interviews with local leaders. These scoping interviews were unstructured conversations focused on broadly understanding the preeminent local issues and tailoring our research methods to community needs. These scoping interviews also helped lead to our first set of key informants, who were predominantly identified through criterion sampling, snowball sampling, and internet searches throughout the research process. The research team attempted to group key informants into one of three spheres of community life (Table 2), government, non-governmental civic, and business, although some key informants span multiple spheres due to their high degree of community involvement. Striving to have representation across the three spheres in each community helped us understand which interest groups may be over or underrepresented, and gear our participant recruitment towards better coverage. Interviews with key informants typically lasted between 45 and 60 min, covering the aforementioned topic areas but often including additional probing questions on each informant's given area of expertise. The vast majority of key informant interviews were conducted over Zoom with video or, less often, the phone.

General community member interviews were conducted slightly differently in Upper County and Ellensburg based upon input from scoping interviewees and key informants. In Ellensburg, approximately half of the community members participated virtually over Zoom or the phone, while the other half participated in-person during a site visit by the research team. These in-person interviews were conducted in a rented space in the local library. Ellensburg community member interviews typically lasted around 30 min. In Upper County, all community member interviews were conducted in-person at community events during a separate research site visit. These interviews were often closer to 15 to 20 min in length,

due to the public space in which they were located. Despite the brief nature of these interviews, each conversation focused on contributors and detractors from community wellbeing, and community changes over time. Thus, many of these conversations involved discussions regarding local economic transitions and demographic shifts. While the format and duration of community member interviews varied slightly between Ellensburg and Upper County, the general topics of conversation and most of the interview questions were the same. Community input drove the research team's rationale for altering methodology, as various communities in Kittitas County felt that different strategies would be necessary to reach a demographically representative sample of community member interviewees. In all communities, flyers advertising this study were sent through relevant email listservs, posted on community social media pages, and physical copies were hung in frequently visited locations recommended by key informants.

Using the software Otter.ai, interviews were recorded with participant consent. Interviews were subsequently transcribed by members of our research team, and coded using ATLAS.ti. The research team included bilingual Spanish speakers, who could interview, transcribe, and translate Spanish-speaking interviews into English.³ Interviews were first coded into general topic groups based on thematic areas of general wellbeing, food access, agriculture, environmental conditions, and population or demographic change. These were the areas of interest that most frequently came up in interviews, as well as the topics that would eventually be coded for specific themes.

Coding for themes related to population changes and amenity migration was an iterative process with multiple steps. We began with a grounded process through which interviews were combed for emergent themes, allowing participant narratives to drive early data analysis (Bailey 2017; Glaser and Strauss 2010). Further coding was conducted using an abductive, or theoretically driven, approach⁴ (Timmermans and Tavory 2012) on specific themes that are recurrent in amenity migration literature such as culture clash and various types of economic pressures.

The second author was incorporated into the analysis process to code 10 of the interviews. Discrepancies between the first and second author's coding was discussed and solved via unanimous decision until an adequate Krippendorff's Alpha of 0.783 was reached. This Alpha score is deemed satisfactory under the assumption that analysis should always strive for a score of 1.000, whereas 0.667 is acceptable and 0.800 suggests significant reliability in the coding process (Krippendorff 2019).

³Seven Spanish interviews were conducted in Ellensburg. These interviews were translated into English by bilingual members of the research team for data analysis. The research team also conducted Spanish language recruitment in Upper County, but only conducted interviews in English in these communities.

⁴An abductive approach to qualitative research is based upon the incorporation of existing theories into a process that also allows for new ideas to emerge through grounded methods. Essentially, theory is put in conversation with emergent findings to either confirm, build upon, or counter the existing framework (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). This is different from the purely grounded approach to research in which empirical findings formulate new theories (Glaser and Strauss 2010).

Results

Although the historical and ongoing importance of amenity migration in Kittitas County was apparent throughout the research process, the coding process illuminated some of the key ways in which recent in-migration may influence wellbeing. Among the most often referenced dimensions of amenity migration and its impacts were perceived differences between longer tenured residents and newcomers, such as differences in political views or community values, instances in which these differences brought about contention (i.e., culture clash), rising housing costs, in-migration from the “West Side,”⁵ and higher income developments or second home communities. Additionally, many interviewees expressed a strong desire to protect the rural identity and small-town-feel of their community, a sentiment that was shared across all parts of Kittitas County. When analyzing each of these factors contextually, several key insights emerge connecting amenity migration to wellbeing, with differences between Upper County and Ellensburg, as well as evolutions in amenity migration’s impacts post-COVID.

Impacts of Amenity Migration on Community Wellbeing

Many interview participants, particularly those with long-standing family roots in the area, noted the discrepancy between the industries that used to drive Upper County and the community’s current socioeconomic landscape. Particularly once the coal mining industry declined in Upper County, many long-time residents began to struggle with poverty. As a result, the influx of wealthier newcomers stood in even greater contrast to the traditional way of life in the community. The development of Suncadia in the late 20th century in particular is thought by many to have marked a shift from a community comprised largely of working-class people to one occupied by wealthier newcomers, seasonal residents, and tourists.

Yes, you’re seeing [new types of people moving to the area] quite a bit, especially in Upper County, where that is a whole different area that was historically a resource extraction area, timber and coal over the years, and now those mines closed in 1970s and timber went through you know, the late or mid 90s. There’s still some timber operations, but that has been a complete wholesale dynamic change up there because you have the influx of a large resort with a high income demographic now bopped in the middle of a very poor area. And you’re seeing people coming over like, ‘oh, I love it over here and I want to build.’ In these historically, lower income areas and property prices go up, price people out who have historically been here and there’s conflict. There’s just congestion. Nobody wants to wait for more than three cars at a stop sign, you have to stop now. We’re seeing what you see all over the Mountain West, just too many people in too small a space, too much money versus too little money, it’s the same challenges laid out in Utah and Colorado and Nevada and all those places.

—Kittitas County

⁵Community members in Kittitas County often use the terms “West-Siders” or “206-ers” to refer to anybody from the Seattle-Tacoma metropolitan area. References to “West-Siders” as the group chiefly responsible for in-migration and population growth were so frequent that the research team coded specifically for these instances.

Different, wealthier socioeconomic groups moving to a community often means that new social norms are put into potential conflict with the community ideals of longer tenured residents. The phenomenon of culture clash can impede equitable community development because different groups may isolate themselves from one another based upon real or perceived differences in values, culture, and financial means. This is often thought to be a hallmark feature of communities experiencing amenity migration, and is a central tenet of the Old West-New West divide (Armstrong and Stedman 2013; Hunter et al. 2005; Kondo et al. 2012; Ulrich-Schad et al. 2022; Ulrich-Schad and Qin 2018). Interview participants frequently noted culture clash as a familiar and recurring issue, as old-timers in particular often describe an “us vs. them” phenomenon.

The community tends to be slower paced than the big city and the people that want to bring the Seattle, Tacoma, Bellevue, or Everett culture with them, don't show a lot of patience for that, if you know what I mean. They tend to be demanding at the grocery stores. They tend to act with a sense of entitlement. They act like tourists and in many cases they are. But the overall base population of the area—again, you go into a coffee shop and you might run into the guy that's going to be mayor, and he might sit down and just jaw with you, and other people come around and everybody knows everybody and that. Well, if the newcomers come in and they see that they don't want to wait 10 seconds until the barista finishes their conversation. They want it and they want it now, you know, that kind of thing. So, because they're used to that over in the big city area, I'm sure you've seen that.

—Upper County

While the cultural impacts of amenity migration are frequent topics of discussion and certainly are perceived as affecting the fabric of community life, the material inequality present in Kittitas County is discussed at least as often as a topic of concern for many. An influx of wealthier individuals into the area has driven up property prices and costs of living, pushing those who live with limited financial resources even closer to the breaking point. Additionally, higher income developments and gentrification have resulted in socioeconomic segregation, discussed by many participants as bringing about situations in which some wealthier residents are ignorant to the poverty that is present in their community, despite the efforts of others to combat hardship.

So, [it's difficult] trying to raise \$100,000 in a community where a lot of people, especially in Upper County, don't feel like, 'oh, I need to give to this.' Because they're new to the community or they live in a very affluent area and they don't actually believe that there's people in need in our community, because they don't leave Suncadia. So, they don't necessarily see the need and they don't contribute to helping with those services... But as we move forward the need continues to grow. Especially with the problems we have with availability of food and the price of food for people that are trying to live and work in this community. Especially those that are maybe making minimum wage or a little bit more at restaurant or resort type jobs.

—Upper County

Additionally, many community members in Upper County and Ellensburg expressed concerns about the impact of further population growth and development sprawl on the local environment. Many buildings in Upper County are already at a relatively high risk for wildfire damage due to their position relative to forestland, and expanding further

in undeveloped areas may only put more homes in harm's way. In Ellensburg, community members mentioned concerns about the impacts of development on agriculture land, limited water resources, and viewsheds. Participants from both communities in Kittitas County discussed the potential environmental consequences of development as a hotly debated topic, and community members were split when assessing the relative merits of existing plans or protections to accommodate further growth.

There's a lot of debate about [development] because part of what's so wonderful about Kittitas County is the beauty of it, and we're starting to see that give way to more houses and more developments and some of them are lovely homes perched in the natural environment, but too many of them ... just clear the land and build houses.
—Ellensburg

Differences across Communities

While Upper County has a longer history of amenity migration and dealing with both the consequences and potential benefits of a changing population, Ellensburg has not experienced this pattern of change to the same extent. However, many interview participants in Ellensburg noted that they feel as though their community is growing and the population is changing in different ways. Some discussed the increased presence of wealthier individuals in Ellensburg as a source of potential challenges for reasons such as culture clash and income inequality, similar to issues that have existed in Upper County for a much greater period of time. However, others noted that a growing and potentially wealthier population may bring new economic opportunities to Ellensburg, a community that has historically been driven by agriculture and its university.

Well, I guess the first thing [that contributes to wellbeing] would be to be able to support your family, you know, financially. And to my surprise, there's been an increase in job creation here. So now the population is increasing due to the available jobs here in town.
—Ellensburg

In addition to the perceived potential economic benefits for some in Ellensburg, others discussed the new cultural opportunities that could emerge from a more diverse population. This sentiment was expressed particularly often by those in Ellensburg's growing Hispanic community, an intra-community difference that could likely be explored at greater depth in future amenity migration research.

But over the years, having been here more than 30 years, I've seen some very positive changes. We have interactions between cultures. That's the other thing that has changed here. And Ellensburg, initially was just the Latino community and the white community. Now we have people from many, many countries. From the Asian community, from the Arabic community. Just different groups, Korean, Japanese, Chinese. So it's very encouraging ... We have a very good diverse group now.
—Ellensburg

While some in Ellensburg noted the potential positive impacts of new people moving to their community, Ellensburg interviewees were still generally split on the relative benefits and drawbacks of increased in-migration. Potential downsides were noted as rising

costs of living, increasing cultural divides between long-time residents associated with the “agricultural community” and newcomers, as well as fear over losing the small-town feel that many see as an important aspect of community wellbeing in Ellensburg.

In Upper County, continued and increasing in-migration was seen as directly threatening wellbeing for working- and middle-class residents. Because the demographics of Upper County in-migrants is generally perceived to be white and wealthy, participants did not discuss the same cultural benefits from amenity migration as interviewees in Ellensburg. It is also possible that since Upper County has seen considerable levels of amenity migration for a longer period of time, many residents take on a more realistic view of amenity migration impacts that downplays the possible positive outcomes.

I would say [the community has] been slowly growing. And then I think there's been a noticeable increase as well, as everyone has noticed with COVID. I think remote working has impacted our communities, because we are like the more affordable [senior] community of Seattle. So, we see a lot of Bellevue and higher tech workers. We also have the influence of Suncadia, which is an interesting thing.
—Upper County

COVID-19 and Amenity Migration

Given the time at which these interviews took place, this research is uniquely positioned to assess perspectives on amenity migration in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many participants noted that once strict lockdown restrictions were lifted, they sensed an increasing number of visitors in their communities because of people's desire to spend time outdoors. Additionally, remote work opportunities expanded for many white-collar workers during the pandemic, allowing even more wealthier individuals to potentially relocate full or part-time to new locales. Participants discussed the rapidly rising costs of housing and property that immediately followed the pandemic, and described this phenomenon as increasing inequalities in their communities that already existed.

Unfortunately, with the market spike, home values skyrocketed ever since about 2020. And so, a lot of people that had rentals sold them because all of a sudden it's worth twice as much as it was two years ago. That's hard to not take advantage of. But the people that were renting can no longer afford to rent and they can't afford to buy because of the cost. Whereas people who are trying to get out of the city, they're like, 'Wow, this house is only \$500,000. It'd be \$900,000 in Seattle.' So, they're thrilled. And we're like 'what this house was \$300,000 last year and now they want five-hundred?' We're like 'we can't afford that.' So, there's been kind of this influx of, not like it was intended to push people out but just kind of influx of people who were like, 'Yeah, I'm so excited. This is gonna work for me and my family.' And then other people who are like, 'I have to move. I have to move somewhere else because there's not a place to rent for me anymore because someone else is moving in.' And so it just kind of changed the dynamics of who's here. There's a lot of new people. It's harder and harder to find people who have been here a long time.
—Upper County

Additionally, potentially increased mobility was believed by some to have allowed more formerly part-time residents to relocate the area full-time. This is not necessarily a bad thing, and may result in greater community interaction from wealthier property owners. However, discussions of cultural clashes between long-time residents and newcomers suggested that there is still work to be done to make increased interaction beneficial for community fabric.

And we have school bus routes now that go through Suncadia. We never had that prior to COVID. So, it's definitely changing in that way. —

Upper County Well from what I understand, it's within the last five years and I guess prices for real estate up here skyrocketed during COVID. People wanted to get out into the woods. So, I guess that's been in the last three years? Yeah, so we're seeing more and more visitors, you know, more and more crowded. There's not a lot of infrastructure as far as streets and stuff here. And then of course, we've got I-90 and there's a lot of traffic on the interstate and it's pretty much year-round. There's more, I guess, in the summertime, but there's still a lot of winter recreation, snowmobiling, skiing, and snowboarding in the area, cross country skiing. So as the area gets discovered, and people from out of town come and buy property, that drives the property prices up. And I think they've sort of plateaued a little bit, but many people that came and had property here are wanting to move out of the city. And that was sort of COVID-times related. But there's also, Suncadia and Tumble Creek are full of people who are retiring from the west side and moving out here permanently. You know, I've met a dozen people that have retired out here in the last two years. —
Upper County

Many expressed fear that more people moving to the area will result in subsequent rising costs of living. In Upper County, many community members felt that the even further influx of wealthier individuals is going to push their community to the breaking point. Frequently in interviews, people in Upper County and Ellensburg expressed a sentiment that the community atmosphere that has historically existed must be protected or it may be lost. Additionally, interviewees often expressed fear over the economic impacts of their changing population, particularly in the housing market.

And so I do think there's been, you know, just through the pandemic and beyond, there's been an increase in people coming here. As reflected in the cost of housing. I mean, housing prices went up pretty significantly in the last few years. And so our affordable housing crisis just got worse. —Ellensburg

Discussion and Conclusion

These findings illuminate discrepancies in how communities may respond to amenity migration moving forward. In Ellensburg, the possibility of population growth bringing greater economic and social opportunities was seen as a benefit to the community, leading some to respond very positively to demographic changes. In Upper County, the wealth inequality, gentrification, and cultural divisions that have existed for several decades have hardened many residents to the possible

benefits of in-migration, leading some long-timer residents to have a more cynical view of the future.

Issues such as housing affordability and socioeconomic inequality were seen as barriers to wellbeing for many long-time community members. Particularly in Upper County, many participants expressed concern over the ability of working- and middle-class residents to comfortably reside in their home community given the rapidly increasing cost of living. These issues are not unique to Kittitas County, and are generally understood as problems stemming from unequal outcomes in many rural communities experiencing amenity migration (Farrell 2020; Pilgeram 2021; Sherman 2021; Winkler 2013). Financial difficulties and challenges to material wellbeing are only compounded by cultural divides within a community. The frequency with which participants discussed the importance of community cohesion and small-town-feel implies that social networks are very important to many residents, a sentiment supported in literature in the interactional approach to community wellbeing (Wilkinson 1991; Wilkinson et al. 1982). Although most interviewees felt that their community still felt relatively small and tight-knit, there was also a sense of fear that this may be lost in the future due to population changes. Preserving social ties and positive interactions will likely help communities deal with changes associated with growing or changing populations (Flint et al. 2024).

Although many participants perceived amenity migration as a threat to affordability and some long-standing ways of life in their community, we must also consider the perspectives of the interviewees who view population change more positively. The economic benefits of amenity migration are complex given the likelihood that higher income in-migrants exacerbate wealth inequality (Farrell 2020; Park and Pellow 2011; Pilgeram 2021; Sherman 2021; Winkler 2013), but initiatives such as the Suncadia Fund for Community Enhancement may present promise as a fundraising tool for groups such as local food banks and youth programs. In the words of one Upper County interviewee, some amenity migrants “who’ve moved to the community ... fell in love with the area and the small town and just go, ‘Gosh, I’m going from a place where I was just a social security number to now I’m in a community where I can actually make a difference.’ And they get involved.”

However, key informants who run community aid non-profit organizations often felt that many of the higher-income newcomers in their communities are not yet embedded enough in the community to recognize the inequality that exists around them. Additionally, literature on philanthropy in high-amenity communities suggests that wealthy newcomers may sometimes be misguided in their charitable efforts, giving relatively little money to community-based organizations that combat inequality (Farrell 2020). This finding brings us back to the interactional approach to community wellbeing, which would likely suggest that through increased interaction across socioeconomic divides, community wellbeing would increase as interactional capacity rises.

While donations to non-profit aid programs are not a long-term solution to rural inequality resulting from amenity migration, they are a helpful tool for bridging the gap between immediate needs and lasting policy changes. Given the findings put forth in this paper, aforementioned policy changes that help establish affordable housing and keep cost of living down are essential. Additionally, collaborations and

partnerships between researchers, municipalities, community members, and NGOs may help stimulate adequate planning for future development (USU GNAR 2024). Participants perceived that the need in their community is only growing post-COVID, perhaps in part because of challenges brought on by the pandemic but also because of the perceived frequency of amenity migration. Adequately addressing rural inequality has been a historical challenge in the United States (Duncan 2014), and it is a critical issue moving into the future.

Better policy to protect wellbeing in rural towns experiencing amenity migration would allow for communities such as Ellensburg to fully embrace what some see as a potential boon for the local economy and culture. Additionally, adequate policy could confront the long-standing ills that Upper County residents routinely referenced as unfortunate facts of life in an increasingly segmented and unequal community. Population shifts do not have to pose extreme threats to community wellbeing, with planning in place to help the rural working class, balanced power structures and access to material resources may allow for differing groups of people to interact and thrive in a shared community that represents a diverse set of values.

It should be noted that this research comes with three primary limitations. The first of which is the research team's "outsider" status. While the research team eventually had success conducting many interviews in both communities, and was able to talk with many lifelong residents and in-migrants in both places, it is unlikely that we can understand local issues to the same extent as people with "insider" status in Kittitas County. Another limitation of this research is our lack of longitudinal data or a pre-pandemic reference point. While we asked people about the time frame in which they perceived population changes, we can only assess their perceptions at the time this research took place. While pre-pandemic data would be interesting, longitudinal assessments of amenity migration and perceptions of community wellbeing moving forward are equally important as community needs continue to change. Lastly, the participants included in our interview are predominantly white, despite considerable effort to reach Spanish speaking residents. Oftentimes, non-white or Latine stakeholders in high-amenity communities are overlooked, particularly if they work in a given community but commute from elsewhere. Research that builds upon the work of Park and Pellow (2011) and Schmalzbauer (2014) is necessary to further expose racial and ethnic inequalities and formulate solutions that improve community wellbeing for all groups. Additionally, research suggests that Latine perspectives on community change may provide further insight into the values that drive perceptions of growth and development (Schmalzbauer 2014).

Despite these limitations, this research contributes to our understanding of how amenity migration impacts wellbeing in the era of COVID-19. Many people face cost challenges and harsh material realities when assessing their ability to stay in their home community long-term. While the concept of community wellbeing extends beyond assessments of economic resources, it is understood that wellbeing is greatly hindered when community members are struggling to afford housing and basic needs. To adequately address community wellbeing concerns arising

from increased amenity migration, it is essential to have policy that expands affordable housing, controls costs of essential goods, and increases funding for community aid programs.

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