# *The Rural Property Interest Mosaic: Collective Action in American and Norwegian Rural Amenity Areas*

Extended Abstract

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**First Author:**
Paul Van Auken, Ph.D
Assistant Professor
Sociology & Environmental Studies
University of Wisconsin Oshkosh
920.424.2038
vanaukep@uwosh.edu

**Second Author:**
Shaun Golding, ABD
Rural Sociology
University of Wisconsin-Madison
sgolding@ssc.wisc.edu
802.779.5815

## Abstract

In this chapter we will present an analysis of development and change in rural amenity areas. Specifically, we examine the pursuit of action via formal planning processes and civil society, as well as their implications for community and land. We will conclude by presenting a framework for collective action, one which is driven by competing interests in domestic property that complicate local planning – labeled *community interests, place interests,* and *commodity interests*. We argue that this framework is useful for understanding why people and groups act, and how decisions – with important ramifications for the health and sustainability of our intrinsically unique places – are made.

## Extended Abstract

> The question before the city is whether it is going to develop according to a plan that will preserve historic resources and the almost pristine beauty of the town which visitors treasure, or whether it is going to go the way of so many newly 'discovered' tourist attractions (Lidfors, 1980, p. 31).

Written nearly thirty years ago about Bayfield, Wisconsin, these words remain salient in this tiny burg at the state's northern tip, on the shores of Lake Superior. Like many rural amenity areas,[1] Bayfield has been "discovered" in recent decades. A slow but steady influx of new residents now poses distinct challenges for the community's ability to balance economic development with preservation of natural resources.

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This chapter will be based on the premise that when it comes to the health and sustainability of our intrinsically unique places, community – specifically the civil society that resides and the local governmental planning processes that take place therein – is a critical arena for decision-making that needs to be recognized and better understood.

Changes in the natural landscape of many rural places are leading to increased pressure on public land managers. Bayfield County, for example, is home to the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore and the Gaylord Nelson Wilderness Area, along with 400,000 acres of publicly-owned forest land. These amenities bring more than $130 million in annual tourism revenue. Additional visitation and activity leads to additional development, however, and since a majority of the area's most desirable coastal property has already been developed, new housing is increasingly built on newly-cleared rural lots providing lake views. Much of this activity is occurring on hillsides and adjacent to public lands, leading to concerns about erosion and water quality, forest fragmentation, and habitat loss. Environmental stewardship in these sensitive areas is in the hands of the twenty-

[1] Natural amenities are specific regional characteristics such as forests, coastline, mountains, etc. (Marcouiller, Clendenning, & Kedzior, 2002). More generally, an amenity is a "feature that increases attractiveness or value, especially of a piece of real estate or a geographic location" ("Amenity," n.d.). Development in rural places of the Western world is increasingly occurring where some capitalize on amenities and others respond to their allure; we refer to these places as amenity areas.

eight small municipal governments and the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewas, along with the thousands of private property owners in the county.

As the physical landscape of a place changes, the social landscape undergoes simultaneous changes that figure prominently in land use debates. Growth in seasonal homes and tourism present both opportunities and challenges for Bayfield County. With 42 percent of all housing in the county used seasonally, "leisure and hospitality" jobs comprise a quarter of all county jobs (USCB, 2000). For many this represents needed economic sustenance but for others it engenders resentment of change. For example, residents with longer local tenures, having lived through various periods of economic restructuring, worry about the vibrancy of the community, its people and institutions. Relative newcomers attracted there by the amenities, on the other hand, are often most concerned with preserving the place,[2] the physical surroundings to which they have become attached. And for place entrepreneurs seeking to capitalize on the community's amenity-transition, commodification and consumption of amenities are the primary concern. While these are generalizations of perspectives observed in two case studies, they represent the divergent ways in which stakeholders view their locality. Viewed in comparative perspective, it becomes evident that these interests influence how individuals assemble to address community change.

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We begin by discussing *community*. Through the interactional theory of community (ITC) (Wilkinson, 1991), it is seen not as objective, static, or necessarily harmonious, but rather as a dynamic product of continual negotiation through interactive processes in the community "field." Community is comprised of a "complete" local society comprised of social organizations/institutions that facilitate recursive interaction among inhabitants; social interaction on issues of local interest; and territory (ibid.) This third component of the ITC is viewed as the container in which recursive interaction occurs and the community field develops, a narrow and abstract conception that limits one's ability to treat the land[3] as a well-integrated variable in the analysis.

Responding to this, we discuss an extension of the ITC that explicitly incorporates the land through the replacement of the relatively abstract, space-oriented *territory* with the more tangible, place-oriented *landscape* (Van Auken, 2007). This allows for a more holistic understanding of how a locality's physical surroundings both shape and become shaped by the decisions of institutional actors and local interactions. This extension also enables the addition of greater specificity in regards to how and why collective action occurs in communities, which is the focus of the chapter.

Two of the primary channels through which people actively confront development pressure and community change are civil society and formal planning processes. According to the tenets of the ITC, to the extent that collective action in these social

[2] Our point of departure on the concept of place is Tuan's (1977) definition: a spatial setting that has been given meaning through the experience, social relationships, emotions, and thoughts of people.
[3] We have chosen to generally use the term *land* rather than the problematic *nature.* Land is defined simply as soils, waters, plants, and animals (Leopold, 1968).

fields is oriented towards the general interests of the locality overall, it will contribute to the development of community. Wilkinson (ibid.), however, asserts that

> Standing against the purpose of building a community field…are the purposes of individuals and groups who pursue private interests in the local arena. The interactional theory postulates no systemic or organic force to assure order, continuity, or balance in this turbulent setting (p. 91).

Public participation and the integration of civil society into more collaborative, decentralized forms of planning and management have been cited by many for their potential to enlarge the spaces for democracy and lead to better environmental stewardship, with implications that the adoption of such principles will create an interest-free zone.

Conversely, research has demonstrated the inherent complexity of attempting to democratize natural resource planning. As Hurley and Walker (2004) contend that "because it makes choices that determine how resources will be used, collaborative natural resource management is inherently political" (p. 737). Further, Lane (2003) asserts that "it is naïve to assume that merely enhancing the role of civil society will (in and of itself) ensure fairness and democracy in planning" (p. 368). Others argue that participatory planning can, in fact, serve to buttress the power of local elites.

Our case demonstrates that the defining interests that move local stakeholders to action need to be better understood, not only by place scholars but also by practitioners, whose efforts to mitigate conflict and make difficult decisions may be enhanced by such knowledge.

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We explore these themes through an analysis of the discourse around key events and data from in-depth interviews of local stakeholders conducted in an American and a Norwegian amenity area. These places provide fruitful settings in which to examine the participation of local stakeholders in civil society and planning, the integration of these spheres, and the mechanics of collective action. Both of our case areas feature recent examples of land use controversy centered on the tension between preservation and development. More specifically, both the American and Norwegian cases involved recent referendums, one of the ways localities in the U.S. have chosen to inform decisions about natural resources management *in lieu* of participatory planning (Benjamin, 2004).

In Bayfield County, one community's voters used a mayoral election and referendum to shift power from pro-development actors to preservation-oriented actors. This was the culmination of contentious debate over the proposed sale of city-owned waterfront to a private condo developer. In the Norway case, along with the allocation of significant space for new seasonal homes, a recently-adopted municipal land-use plan called for nearly one-fifth of the municipality's land area to be the site of a wind farm. After months of rancorous debate, a referendum about the wind facility was held. Along with

examining these events, we will also compare and contrast the relevant civil society groups in both areas.

As alluded to, we frame the planning efforts and collective action described above as political economic struggles to determine the fate of local resources. Landscape is a resource of primary concern in rural amenity areas, and conflict often arises based on threats and opportunities related to private interests tied to the landscape. How can sociological theory aid in our understanding of what these interests are and what leads to group formation based upon them?

Davis (1991) combines theoretical strands from classical sociology in a framework that explains conflicts and cleavages in neighborhoods based on the pursuit of private interests (as also alluded to by Wilkinson). From Marx he derives the notion that objective, antagonistically relational interests are the basis for group formation and conflict, while from Weber he applies the idea that such interests may be inherent in the issues surrounding ownership and use of residential property. According to Davis (ibid.), "A better understanding of the conditions for collective action on a territorial basis begins with an understanding of the 'interest mosaic' that domestic property engenders" (p. 43).

There are two basic domestic property interests: accommodation and accumulation. These interests are based on the interest of stakeholders in the use value or exchange value of the property, and can be further subdivided into six "relational advantages" of domestic property (ibid.). Accommodative interests can be broken down into the categories of security (stability of tenure and physical safety); amenity (quantity and *quality of one's living space*); and, autonomy (control) in domestic property (ibid., my emphasis). Accumulative interests, on the other hand, can be distinguished by equity (unencumbered value in land and buildings); liquidity (income potential); and, legacy (inheritability) (ibid.). These interests are material, in that they originate in relations surrounding a physical unit – land and property used for shelter (ibid.). Davis further argues that,

> These six advantages are *objective* in the sense that one's position in relation to domestic property carries a probability of particular benefits, a susceptibility to particular costs, and a propensity to act in certain ways that inhere in the position itself, regardless of whether the incumbent of that position is aware of this state of affairs (p. 56, emphasis in original).

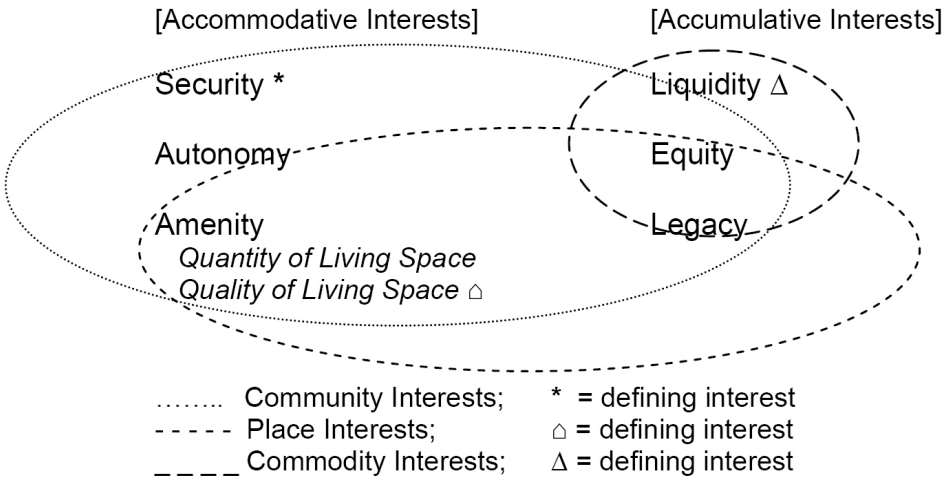
Domestic property interests are also seen to be collective, social and locational, precarious and contentious (ibid.). Finally, Davis argues that people engage in collection action – latent interests become manifest – in response to threats to their interests or to take advantage of opportunities to enhance those interests.

In this chapter we present a version of Davis's framework that has been extended based on the particularities of rural amenity areas. In such places, while some local stakeholders are most concerned with sustaining a "living" community that will continue to provide job opportunities and housing options that they can afford, for others the defining interest is in their ability to profit from new development opportunities resulting

from increased demand for housing and commercial activity in the area. Still others are galvanized in defense of the land and amenities that define their quality of life.

We will argue that while categories like newcomer and long-timer are relevant in these rural amenity areas, domestic property interests are more important in inducing collective action and in influencing decision-making. We believe that the particular domestic property interests found in the two case areas can be clustered into three categories to form a *rural property interest mosaic*, as summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Rural Property Interest Mosaic




While this is an attempt to simplify a complex arena of social life, we believe it can aid in our understanding of collective action and landscape change in such areas. We argue that there is overlap between categories – *community interests, place interests,* and *commodity interests* – but that each has a defining interest inherently at odds with the others.[4]

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Like they do in any other locality, residents of rural amenity areas act in collective fashion for many reasons, based on such factors as religion, race, gender, ethnicity, class, or common interests of various types. In regards to the shifting landscapes, demographics, and social relations of such places, however, we believe that a property interest mosaic such as the one proposed herein is analytically useful.

As we will elaborate upon in the chapter, this framework helps to explain the contentious nature of participatory planning, based on the struggle between competing property interest groups, and how participatory planning can exacerbate local conflict and produce a situation in which implementation of objectives from such plans is a distinct challenge, due to political shifts related to those interests. It also helps to provide a rationale for the formation of particular types of civil society organizations and a guide for understanding the consequences of the decisions that result.

[4] We will describe each interest group category in more detail in the chapter.

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