

Rural Society and Environment in America



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RURAL SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT IN AMERICA

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We dedicate this book to our parents, and to our families:

Mr. and Mrs. Arnold Carlson
the late Mr. and Mrs. Cecil Lane
Mr. and Mrs. William Lassey
and
Mrs. John E. Carlson
Diane, Craig, and Lorene Carlson
Sherry Sellars Hassard
Derek and Dara Sellars
Dione and Maureen Lassey

Preface

The social history of rural America is a story of continuing transition. The sociology of rural life was once focused almost exclusively on agriculture—long the predominant rural occupation and the preoccupation of individuals concerned with rural life. But, no more; the farm population has declined drastically both in total numbers and as a proportion of the total rural population, to be replaced by a much more heterogeneous mixture of occupations and lifestyles. The social fabric of rural communities and the biological and physical environments are undergoing substantial adjustments as the new population blends with longtime rural residents. This book attempts to capture the general flavor and some of the specific attributes of the emerging rural society in its changing environmental setting.

The major goals of this text are (1) to offer a description of the contemporary status of rural society, (2) to develop an environmental perspective from which to examine social issues in rural regions, (3) to examine the more profound and possibly enduring impacts which are occurring, (4) to suggest specific procedures which may assist the satisfactory resolution of major issues while productively dealing with profound impacts, and finally (5) to reflectively consider what the future might hold if public policies and procedures can effectively respond to contemporary and emerging social and environmental opportunities.

The Basis for a New Analysis of Rural Society and Environment

For the first time in recent decades population is growing *more* rapidly in rural regions than in urban centers. Disenchantment with the distasteful elements of urban life (crowding, air pollution, water pollution, noise, crime, etc.) is apparently decreasing migration to the cities and causing rural places to have greater appeal. Business and industry are decentralizing, and rural natural resources are in greater demand than ever before. Rural recreation and second-home developments are burgeoning. The collective effects of these (and other) changes lead to increased job opportunities for people who want to enjoy the presumed special values of rural living. However, national statistics reveal that the social conditions in rural regions are much worse than in urban environments. Poverty is more prevalent; medical care is poorer; the minority groups are more deprived; housing is less adequate; public transportation is sparse; public services are less available; and rural values are more traditional than in urban settings.

What happens, then, when migrants from urban areas begin to enter rural communities in large numbers, particularly when many of those communities are largely unprepared for major social adjustments? There is no easy answer to such a question. But solutions are more likely to be discovered if local people, and those individuals from outside who might try to help, have a reasonably clear understanding of existing and potential consequences. For example, the population influx will put increased pressure on a sometimes fragile rural environment. If

adequate caution is not exercised, the environment will deteriorate—gradually destroying the life-sustaining resources.

But not all rural communities will grow. Some will continue to decline, while others will remain stable. These circumstances must also be understood—and actions taken to alleviate stresses on the human population and the environmental setting. Although agriculture and other resource-based activities may have declined as components of rural productivity, they continue to be dominant in some regions and remain important as components of the rural system.

Research and disciplined observation have illuminated the processes and events in rural society, adding incrementally to the knowledge base. Numerous articles, books, and other knowledge-dissemination media are available as references for study and enlightenment. However, it is our judgment that none of these have attempted a reasonably comprehensive treatment of rural society interacting with the biophysical environment—particularly in the context of increasing pressure on finite and threatened natural resources.

Special Features

The interrelatedness between human activity and the biophysical environment is the key theme throughout this book. Social phenomena are examined as they interact with, and depend upon, their environmental circumstances. In turn, the environment is examined as it is impacted and changed by human activity. Particular attention, of course, is focused on the interaction between *rural society* and the biophysical environment. This book is thus intended to be a contribution not only to rural sociology, but also to the new field of environmental sociology—a field characterized by its concern with interactions between social phenomena and the biophysical environment. The examination of societal-environmental interactions draws heavily from the environmental sociology perspectives emphasized by our Washington State University colleagues William R. Catton, Jr., and Riley E. Dunlap (note the references to their work in several parts of the volume, but particularly in Chapter 2).

The traditional content of rural sociology books is also covered, although not in the detail nor in the manner of many recent volumes. Basic sociological concepts are included, but in Appendix A rather than in the main text—under the assumption that many students and other readers might already have been introduced to the discipline of sociology. Appendix A will provide a concise review for those who might have become “rusty”! Basic social institutions are treated in considerable detail, but in the context of important rural issues rather than as separate descriptive chapters. For example, the rural family is discussed as a unit within the rural community, as part of the rural heritage, as a part of certain disadvantaged segments of society, and as the subject of impacts when community growth occurs—but we make no effort to discuss the details of the family as a social institution.

The later chapters focus on mechanisms for dealing with new opportunities or critical problems. We assume that adaptation or adjustment of rural social organization is essential to effective management of the new social and environmental realities. Despite the huge array of problems confronting rural regions, we take an optimistic stance; if local people and public institutions will learn enough about the critical issues, and learn to use the processes, tools, and

other available resources, rural society and environment will be a happy setting for realization of human and environmental values. Appendix B provides an overview of the contributions of sociology to improving the conditions of our rural society and environment.

The ideas for study or first-hand learning at the end of each chapter serve in part as our summary of the key questions needing answers and the projects or activities which are likely to generate dependable and insightful answers. In a similar vein, the Glossary offers a selected set of definitions which should help to sharpen understanding of the language that we consider important as a tool for conversing about social and environmental dimensions of rural regions.

Potential Readers

The book is intended for students from a wide variety of disciplines—whether the students are enrolled in college or university classes, or are independent scholars undertaking an informal quest for understanding. For example, individuals involved with agriculture, forestry, mining, fish production, energy production, water management, or other fields of activity involving use of natural resources will need an understanding of the interactions of rural society and environment as a basis for appreciating the role of their own field of interest. Many individuals focusing on economics, sociology, political science, government, geography, engineering, architecture, health care, law, business, social work, and many other fields will do much of their professional work in rural areas and should benefit from knowledge about the environmental context of their work.

Government officials with responsibilities for rural regions could also benefit from the information and perspectives offered in these pages. Academic faculty from each of the fields described above should do better work based on updated knowledge about rural regions, as they guide students in preparing for professional activity or as they undertake research. Similarly, professionals already at work in rural places, such as educators, clergy, agency staff, health providers, and social service workers, should find this volume timely and illuminating as they work to fulfill their leadership roles.

Credit Is Due

The authors take full, and equal, credit for the objectives, organization, and content of our work. We also accept full responsibility for the errors and omissions which our colleagues will undoubtedly discover! However, no volume of this sort is ever produced without valuable input from a wide array of friends, colleagues, and other authors. As noted earlier in this preface, the environmental sociology perspective draws substantially from the work of Riley E. Dunlap (who also contributed many helpful suggestions for improving the manuscript) and William R. Catton. Don A. Dillman provided support and inspiration throughout the project, and his work contributes directly to much of the introductory material, particularly Chapters 1 and 4. The review of social impact assessment in Chapter 11 benefited mightily from the work of a WSU colleague, William Freudenburg. Finally, much of the interpretation and projection of population changes in rural areas was based on discussions and research results provided by John Wardwell, also a WSU colleague.

We deliberately solicited suggestions from a great many individuals, some of whose names are beyond recall after three years of constant conversation and correspondence about this effort. However, we do recognize (and recall) the very helpful contributions from the following individuals, who took special time from busy schedules to talk, read, recommend, review, or prepare materials:

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*John E. Carlson
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Contents

List of Illustrations	xvii
Preface	xix
Part A	
Characteristics of Rural Society and Environment	
1 Contemporary Rural Society in Perspective	2
THE HISTORICAL TRANSITION	2
THE DIVERSITY OF RURAL AMERICA	4
DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN RURAL AND URBAN	4
THE MEANING OF RURAL: TECHNICAL AND CULTURAL	8
A SUMMARY OF TRENDS IN RURAL POPULATION	9
THE BASIS FOR POPULATION GROWTH	13
IMPLICATIONS OF RURAL POPULATION GROWTH	16
MAJOR UNRESOLVED ISSUES	19
NEED FOR NEW ALTERNATIVES	19
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	20
QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION	21
PROJECTS	21
REFERENCES	22
2 People and Resources: Social and Environmental Interaction	24
BASIC ASSUMPTIONS	25
RELATIONSHIPS AMONG ECOLOGICAL, ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND POLITICAL VALUES	25
SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL INTERACTION	29
DIMENSIONS OF ENVIRONMENT	31
DIMENSIONS OF NEEDED UNDERSTANDING	34
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	34
QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION	34
PROJECTS	35
REFERENCES	36
3 The Rural Heritage	37
THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY	37
THE EVOLUTION OF RURAL LIFE	38
The Golden Age (1900-1920)	40
The Depression Era (1920-1933)	40

The New Deal (1933–1940)	41
World War II and the Korean Conflict (1941–1952)	45
Changing Administrations and Increasing Production (1953–1965)	45
A Broader Rural Perspective (1966–1980)	45
THE AGRARIAN VALUE SYSTEM	47
The Independence of the Farmer	47
Agriculture as the "Basic" Industry	48
Farming as the Naturally Good Life	48
Value Assumptions and Reality	48
THE BASIS FOR CHANGE IN RURAL LIFE	49
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	50
QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION	51
PROJECTS	52
REFERENCES	52
4 Rural and Urban Regions: Contrasts and Relationships	54
DEFINITIONS OF RURAL AND URBAN	54
BUILT, MODIFIED, AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS	55
RURAL AND URBAN COMMUNITY CONTRASTS	56
Spatial Distinctions	58
Social Distinctions	59
OBJECTIVE POPULATION CONTRASTS AND OCCUPATIONAL	
DIFFERENCES	60
Educational Differences	61
CONTRASTS IN ATTITUDES, VALUES, BELIEFS, AND BEHAVIOR	66
Political Attitudes and Behavior	67
Quality of Economic Well-Being	69
Quality of Environmental Well-Being	69
The Public Image of Rural and Urban People	70
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	73
QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION	73
PROJECTS	73
REFERENCES	74
5 Rural Lifestyles: The Emerging Panorama	76
CONTEMPORARY FARMING AND RANCHING	76
The Modern Farm Family	77
The Small-Scale Farmer	81
Ranching	83
LUMBERING	86
MINING	91
FISHING	94

RURAL BUSINESS	95
EMERGING RURAL LIFESTYLES	96
Recreational Services	99
New Businesses or Professions	100
Federal, State, and Local Government Professions	100
DISTINCTIVE RURAL LIFESTYLES	100
The Amish	100
Communes and New Communities	106
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	108
QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION	108
PROJECTS	109
REFERENCES	109

Part B

Major Rural Social Issues

6 Health Care Issues and Possibilities	112
THE MAJOR PROBLEMS	112
LEVELS OF HEALTH SERVICES	114
COMPONENTS OF THE RURAL HEALTH CARE SYSTEM	114
SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTRAINTS ON RURAL HEALTH CARE	115
PHYSICAL HEALTH CARE ALTERNATIVES	115
Physician Shortages	115
<i>The Basis for Physician Shortages / Solo versus Group Practice</i>	
Efforts to Relieve Physician Shortages	120
<i>An Experiment in the Northwest</i>	
Dentists	122
Supporting Health Personnel	124
<i>Nurse Clinicians / Medex / Health Service Corps</i>	
MENTAL HEALTH CARE ALTERNATIVES	129
Efforts to Improve Services	130
HEALTH SERVICE FACILITIES	131
HEALTH CARE FOR SPECIAL RURAL SUBGROUPS	131
Minority Populations with Acute Problems	134
TRANSPORTATION AND COMMUNICATION	134
FUNDING RURAL HEALTH CARE	135
HEALTH EDUCATION FOR CITIZENS	135
CURRENT STATUS OF RURAL PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICES	136
COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION FOR RURAL HEALTH SERVICES	136

PLANNING FOR HEALTH SERVICES	137
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	137
QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION	138
PROJECTS	139
REFERENCES	139
7 Disadvantaged Rural People	142
INCIDENCE OF RURAL POVERTY	142
DIMENSIONS OF DEPRIVATION	143
Employment Status	144
Family Size	144
Welfare Status	144
Location	145
Housing	145
THE BASIS FOR RURAL POVERTY	145
Education	145
Job Availability	145
Out-Migration	146
Family Size	147
Seasonality and Price Fluctuation	147
Access to Information	147
Allocation of Public Resources	147
THE UNIQUE PROBLEMS OF RURAL ETHNIC MINORITIES	148
Blacks	148
Chicanos	151
American Indians	152
THE MOUNTAIN POOR PEOPLE	159
MIGRANT WORKERS	165
CONFLICT BETWEEN RESOURCE PRESERVATION AND ALLEVIATION OF POVERTY	166
IMPROVING THE SOCIAL SITUATION FOR THE RURAL DISADVANTAGED	166
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	170
QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION	170
PROJECTS	171
REFERENCES	171
8 Women, Youth, and the Elderly	173
RURAL WOMEN	173
The Historical Pattern	174
The Contemporary Status of Rural Women	174
Involvement in Decisions and New Roles	178
The Future	178
RURAL YOUNG PEOPLE	179

Current Status of Rural Youth	180
Values and Preferences	180
Major Influences on Attitudes, Preferences, and Behavior	181
Minority and Nonminority Status	184
A Prescription for Rural Youth Development	185
Summary Discussion	185
ELDERLY PEOPLE IN RURAL AMERICA	186
Contemporary Status	186
Immediate Environment	188
Role Problems of the Rural Elderly	191
Health and Medical Care	191
Social Participation	193
Feelings of Well-Being	199
Basis for Satisfaction or Dissatisfaction	200
Program Alternatives for Meeting Needs of the Rural Elderly	201
Consequences of Community Development	202
Positive Dimensions of Growing Old	202
Community and Regional Councils on Aging	203
Summary Discussion	203
QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION	205
PROJECTS	205
REFERENCES	206

Part C

Major Environmental Issues and Social Impacts

9 Social Implications of Land Settlement and Ownership	210
THE BASIS FOR CONTEMPORARY SETTLEMENT PATTERNS	210
Potential Shifts in Settlement Patterns	215
PRIVATE LAND ISSUES	215
Land Tenure	215
<i>Farm Land Tenure Categories</i>	
Recreational Development on Private Land	216
FEDERAL LAND OWNERSHIP	220
Organizational Structures for Public Land Management	221
<i>Bureau of Land Management / U.S. Forest Service</i>	
Multiple-Use Sustained Yield Act	224
Recreation on Public Land	225
Mineral Resource Development	225
<i>Mineral Exploration / Problems Associated with Mineral Extraction</i>	
Major Public Land-Use Issues	227

INTERFACE BETWEEN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC LAND	227
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	228
QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION	228
PROJECTS	231
REFERENCES	231
10 <i>Food, Fiber, Minerals, Energy, and Water</i>	233
INCREASING DEMAND FOR RESOURCE PRODUCTIVITY	233
FOOD AND FIBER PRODUCTION	233
Preserving Farmland	234
Forest Production	236
ENERGY AND MINERAL PRODUCTION	252
Mineral Leasing	254
WATER SUPPLY	254
SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF RESOURCE	
UTILIZATION	259
Distribution of Benefits from Resource Development	261
USE OF PUBLIC LANDS FOR RESOURCE EXTRACTION	261
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	262
QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION	263
PROJECTS	263
REFERENCES	264
11 <i>Social Dimensions of Environmental Issues</i>	265
ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES	265
Misuses of Land	265
<i>Carrying Capacity</i>	
Misuses of Water	273
Misuses of Minerals	274
Misuses of Air	275
Variations in Concern about Environmental Issues	276
SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ANALYSIS	276
The Basis for Social Impact Assessment	276
Methods and Categories of Impact Assessment	277
Indirect and Long-Term Effects	279
Assessment of Population Change	279
Assessment of Technology	279
Assessment of Social Systems	283
<i>Families / The Neighborhood / Communities / Formal Organizations</i>	
Assessment of Cultural Systems	285

Assessment of Personality Systems	286
METHODS OF SOCIAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT	287
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	292
QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION	293
PROJECTS	293
REFERENCES	294
Part D	
Evolving Social Organization	
12 Evolving Rural Social Organization: Local Units	298
CHARACTERISTICS OF LOCAL ORGANIZATION	298
Local Government	300
<i>Regionalization of Local Government</i>	
Rural Public Services	306
Education	307
<i>Community Schools / Community Education / National Programs for Rural Education / Problems and Progress</i>	
Churches	311
Law and Justice	313
Voluntary Associations	314
Cooperative Forms of Business or Service	315
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	315
QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION	316
PROJECTS	317
REFERENCES	317
13 Regional, State, and National Social Organization	319
CENTRALIZATION OF RESOURCE UTILIZATION BUSINESSES AND PUBLIC ORGANIZATION	319
AGRIBUSINESS	320
RURAL INDUSTRY	325
HIGHER EDUCATION	327
Community Colleges	328
THE FEDERAL DEPARTMENTS AND AGENCIES	329
U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)	329
Department of the Interior	329
Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)	330
Department of Education	330
Department of Transportation (DOT)	330
Department of Defense	331
Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)	331
Department of Energy	332

STATE DEPARTMENTS AND AGENCIES	332
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	332
QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION	333
PROJECTS	334
REFERENCES	334
14 Rural Development, Planning, and Growth Management	335
RURAL DEVELOPMENT	335
Design for Organization	336
Process	336
Evolution of Systematized Rural Development	338
<i>Role of Politics and Education / Rural Development Centers / Regional Initiatives / Special Focus Programs</i>	
Major Rural Development Problems	341
RURAL PLANNING	342
Environmental Planning	345
Planning in the Smaller Rural Towns and Cities	347
Planning and Public Land Ownership	349
Planning for Human Services	350
<i>Components of Human Services Planning</i>	
GROWTH MANAGEMENT	351
Rationale for Growth Management	351
Techniques of Growth Management	352
Suitability of Selected Techniques for Growth Management	354
Alternative Growth Management Strategies	354
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	358
QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION	359
PROJECTS	359
REFERENCES	359
Part E	
The Future	
15 The Social-Environmental Condition and The Future	362
THE PRESENT CONDITION	362
Population	362
Technology	362
Social Systems	362
Cultural Systems	363
Resource Limitations and Institutional Adaptation	363
Rural-Urban Contrasts	363

FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES	364
Government	364
Poverty	364
Education	364
Housing	365
Health Care	365
The Elderly	365
Women	365
Youth	365
Legal Justice	366
Transportation	366
Resource Management	366
In Sum	366
WHAT THE FUTURE MIGHT BE LIKE	366
Leadership	367
New Organization	367
Diversity	367
Occupations	367
New Roles for Women	368
The Family	368
Youth	369
The Elderly	369
Lifestyle	369
Community	369
Poorer Communities	370
Social Organization	370
Standards of Living	370
Health Care Systems	370
Attitudes and Values	371
In Sum	371
Tools for Helping Structure the Future Productively	371
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	374
QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION	375
PROJECTS	375
REFERENCES	375
Appendix A <i>Basic Sociological Concepts Applied to Rural Society</i>	376
CULTURE	377
SOCIALIZATION	379
SOCIAL CONTROL	380
SOCIAL STRATIFICATION	381
MINORITY GROUPS	382
SOCIAL ORGANIZATION	382
INSTITUTIONS	384
CONCLUSION	384
REFERENCES	385