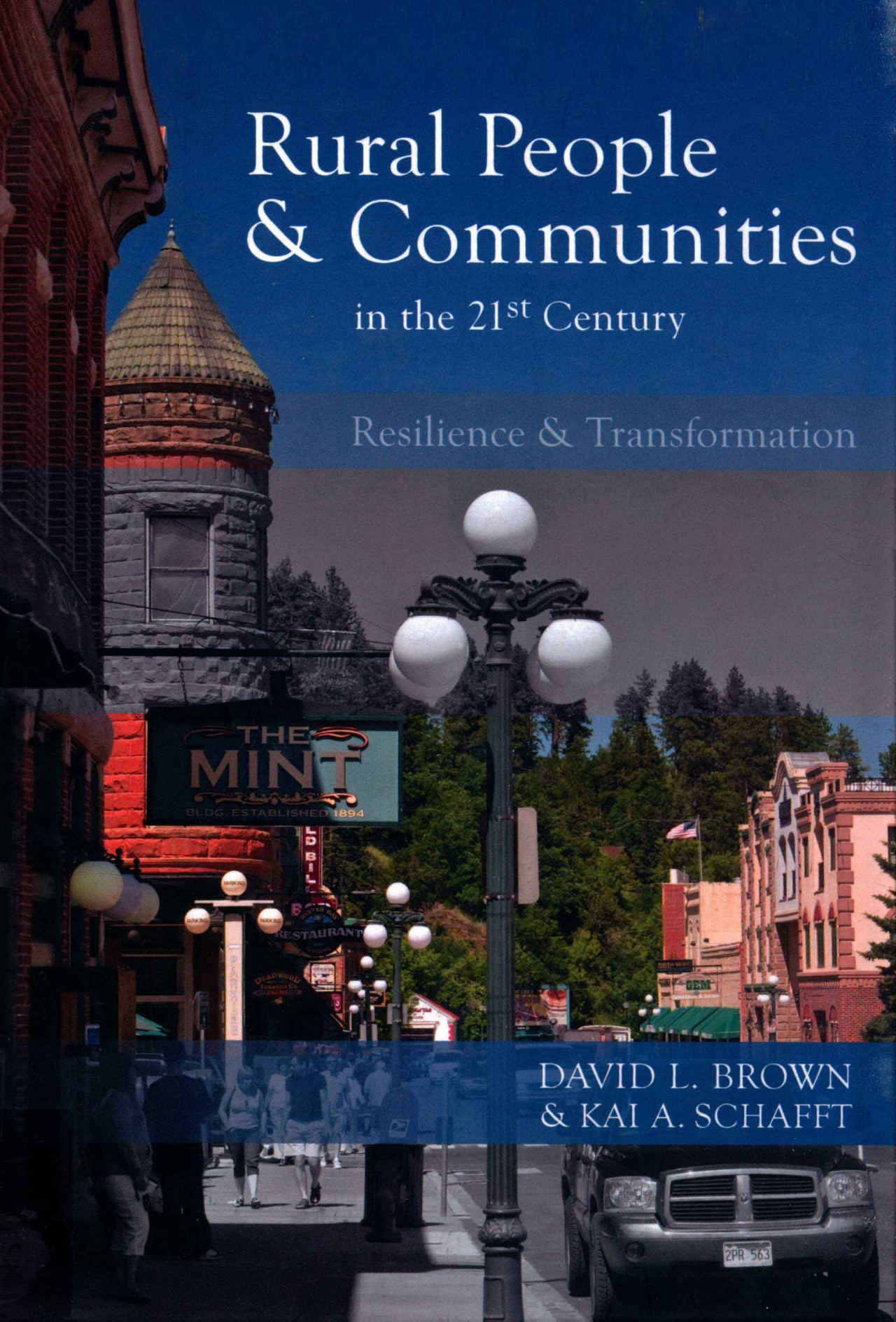# Rural People & Communities

in the 21st Century

Resilience & Transformation

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Resilience and Transformation

DAVID L. BROWN AND KAI A. SCHAFFT

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PART I

THINKING ABOUT RURAL PLACES IN
METROPOLITAN SOCIETY

1 Rurality in Metropolitan Society

In 2008, the United Nations announced that for the first time in history, more than half of the world's population lived in urban environments (U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division 2007). While the share of population living in urban areas is higher in more developed nations, the United Nations projects that less developed nations will also surpass the 50 percent urban threshold by 2019. If the world is so highly urbanized, why should we care about rural people and communities, particularly in metropolitan societies such as the United States? In the following section we discuss reasons why rural people and places matter in the twenty-first century, even in the context of overwhelming urbanization. These issues will provide the substantive framework shaping our analysis of persistence and change in rural society that is contained in the remaining chapters. However, prior to examining these contemporary issues, we need to acknowledge that concern about rural people and places did not develop overnight. The intellectual legacy of rural studies began over one hundred years ago with the profound societal transformations that gave rise to sociology and other social sciences. We briefly review this legacy before turning to a discussion of the reasons why rural people and places matter in contemporary society.

The Development of Social Scientific Thought about Rurality

Interest in the social effects of the transformation from rural to urban society traces to the very beginnings of systematic social science. Concern about the perceived negative outcomes of modernization, in particular of industrialization and urbanization, represented one of the central questions driving the new discipline of sociology during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Two influential titans of classical European sociology, Ferdinand Toënnies and Emile Durkheim, shared a concern for the social outcomes of the transformation from rural agrarian to urban industrial society. Both scholars observed that the nature of social relationships is fundamentally altered in larger, denser, more diverse urban places compared with their rural counterparts. Toënnies wrote of the transformation from *Gemeinschaft* (community) to *Gesellschaft* (society), while Durkheim used the terms mechanical and organic solidarity to describe the social relationships characterizing urban and rural communities. "What brings men together," he wrote, "are mechanical causes and impulsive forces, such as affinity of blood, attachment to the same soil, ancestral worship, community of habits, etc." (Durkheim 1964 [1933]: 278). They also both argued that industrialization and changes in the organization of agriculture resulted in communities where more distant relationships replaced the primary social ties characteristic

of villages and the agrarian countryside. Durkheim, in particular, worried that this alteration of the fundamental nature of social relationships would separate people from the institutions and interpersonal influences that regulate social behavior and produce social solidarity. Another early sociologist who contributed to understanding the origin of urban–rural differentiation was Pitirim Sorokin, a Russian-American scholar who founded the department of sociology at Harvard University. His work focused more on demographic and occupational attributes of differentiating urban and rural communities than on the relational issues discussed by Toënnies and Durkheim (Sorokin & Zimmerman 1929).

   In the United States this concern was most clearly articulated by Louis Wirth (1938) who felt that urban life released people from social controls and alienated them from their neighbors. He saw urban areas as "communities of limited liability" where increased population size and density reduced community attachment, and family and community ceased being the building blocks of society. We will explore these and other sociological concerns about urban and rural community in greater depth in Chapters 2 and 3. For now it is sufficient to acknowledge that interest in rural (and urban) places and populations has a rich legacy in the history of social thought.

What is Rural in a Metropolitan Society?

Like many terms in common usage, the meaning of *rural* is somewhat ambiguous. Even within the social sciences there is disagreement about the meaning and exact definition of rural. The strongest disagreement is between scholars who consider rural to be a type of socio-geographic locality and those who see rural as a social construct. Let's examine these two approaches in order to understand their similarities and differences.

The Location or "Place" Approach to Defining Rural

Social scientists, policy-makers and program administrators typically define rural as a particular kind of socio-geographic place that is distinguished by certain attributes. While scholars, policy-makers, and statistical agencies often concentrate on one or another defining characteristic such as population size or dependence on farming, most acknowledge that rurality is a multidimensional concept that entails a combination of social, demographic, economic, and/or cultural aspects.

The Social Constructivist Approach to Defining Rural

Other social scientists consider rural to be a social construction. Keith Halfacree (1993: 34), for example, has observed that "the rural as space and the rural as representing space" must be distinguished. He contends that a contrast should be drawn between a largely "material" understanding of rural, based on physical space, geographic characteristics and population density, and a *dematerialized* concept that places rural within the realm of imagination (Halfacree 2004). Instead of trying to identify social, demographic, environmental, and economic

attributes that define rural places and distinguish them from their urban counterparts, this approach emphasizes symbols and signs people imagine when they think about rurality.

As Cloke and Milbourne (1992: 360) have observed, rurality becomes a matter of determining how people "construct themselves as being rural," that is, of understanding rurality as a socially constructed state of mind. In other words, the social constructivist position contends that mental constructs are an element of culture that helps to determine what people consider as "rural." Woods (2006: 11) has observed, this "shifts attention from the statistical features of rural areas to the people who live there . . ." Hence, places are rural not because of their structural and/or environmental characteristics, but because people who live there think of themselves as being rural with respect to a set of social, moral, and cultural values (Bell 1992; Cloke & Milbourne 1992), an idealized or idyllic landscape (Boyle & Halfacree, 1998), and/or a lifestyle more attuned to organic community life than to a more bureaucratic and rationalized form of social organization (Short 1991).[1]

In this book we will treat these two perspectives as complementary rather than competitive, yet our approach will most often be in line with the locality perspective; *we will treat rural areas as places where people live, work, and visit and as spatially delimited natural environments.* Following this approach, the next section examines four distinguishing dimensions of places: demographic and ecological, economic, institutional, and socio-cultural – comparing rural versus urban areas on a number of attributes contained in the respective domains. You will see that rural areas can be defined in terms of what they are and what they are not, in terms of their intrinsic characteristics, or as a critique of urban.

A Multidimensional Approach to Defining Rural Places

Population & Settlement Structure and Landscape

Demographic and ecological attributes such as population size and density are most commonly used to distinguish rural from urban with the general consensus that rural places are smaller and less dense than their urban counterparts. Rural areas are also thought to be geographically and socially isolated from centers of power and influence which are thought to emanate from urban complexes. Finally, rural areas are considered to be "natural" environments while urban environments are seen as being constructed. As shown in Figure 1.1, while rural areas are found throughout the U.S, areas with the highest degree of rurality, as indicated by small population size and spatial separation from metropolitan centers, are concentrated in the Great Plains, the Midwest, the Ozarks and Appalachia.

Economy

Rural areas can also be distinguished by their economic activities, and in particular by the kinds of goods and services that are produced. Traditionally, rural economies have been characterized by heavy dependence on primary industries such as farming, fishing, forestry, and mining, and these are the types of activities that comprise most people's images of rural places. As will be shown in Chapters

Legend:
- Metro - pop. 1 million or more
- Metro - pop. 1 mill. -250,000
- Metro - fewer than 250,000 pop.
- Urban pop. 20,000+ adj.
- Urban pop. 20,000+ not adj.
- Urban pop. 2,500-19,999 adj.
- Urban pop. 2,500-19,999 not adj.
- Completely rural - adj.
- Completely rural - not adj.
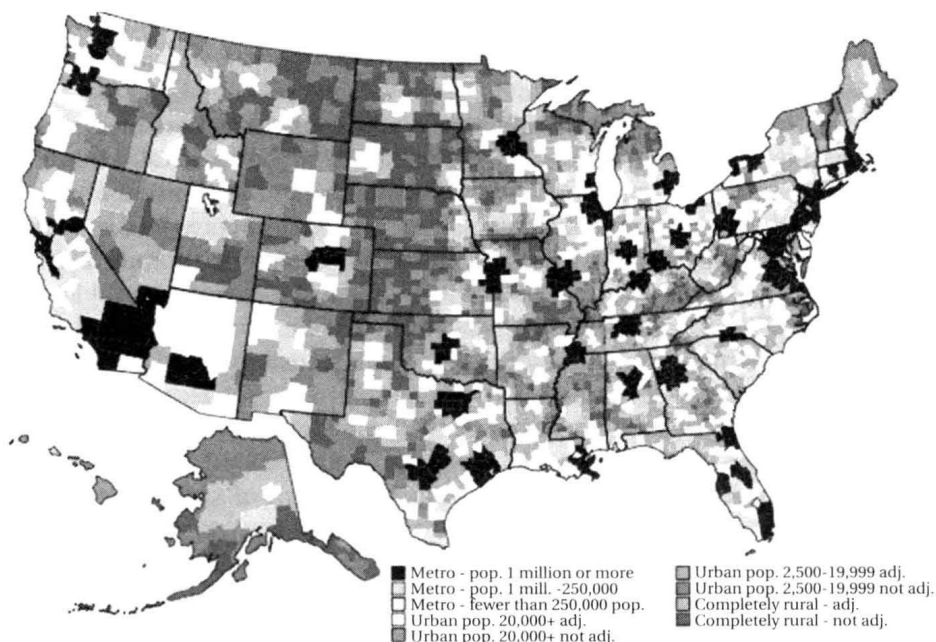
Source: USDA Economic Research Service

Figure 1.1 Urban–Rural Comparisons, 2003

5, 8, and 9, however, rural economies have undergone fundamental changes in the past fifty years, and rural workers now obtain their living from a different array of jobs, some local, and some located at a distance.

Rural economies are not simply distinguished by the nature of their economic activities, but also by the number of establishments they contain and the size of those establishments, by the diversity of economic activities or lack thereof, and by whether economic activity is controlled locally or from a distance. With respect to these economic dimensions, rural areas are typically thought to have a small number of jobs and firms, to be comprised of small-scale establishments, to lack economic diversity, and to be controlled by external interests.

Institutions
Rural and urban areas also differ with respect to the complexity and capacity of their institutional spheres. This difference is especially marked with respect to local government and the public sector. While urban governments typically have strong managerial and technical capacity, rural governments are limited and challenged with respect to public management and technical expertise. We will examine local government capacity in some detail in Chapter 4. Urban governments also typically exceed rural governments in the ability to raise financial resources in support of public services and other responsibilities, but fiscal capacity is quite variable among urban governments as well. Rural areas are characterized by more limited choices in other institutional realms such as religious denominations, clubs, associations, and service organizations in which to participate.

Socio-Cultural

Finally, rural areas are thought to differ from their urban counterparts with respect to a number of socio-cultural domains, but evidence supporting this claim is not convincing. While some aspects of socio-cultural differentiation can be documented, many of the socio-cultural attributes that comprise popular images of rurality have now diminished if they ever existed, and other aspects are being muted by ongoing processes of social, demographic and technological change. Rural–urban differences in social attitudes are probably most persistent and best supported by empirical analysis. There is convincing evidence, for example, that rural people are more socially conservative. For example, research shows that rural voters provide decisive support for socially conservative candidates in many parts of the United States.

Rural areas are also thought to be more homogeneous with respect to race and ethnicity, although, as we show in Chapter 7, this is truer in some regions than in others. Moreover, recent immigration trends in the U.S. have distributed foreign born persons more widely than in the past, thereby diversifying many rural populations (Kandel & Cromartie 2004; Kritz & Gurak 2005; Jensen 2006). It is also thought that rural communities are more likely to be characterized by close personal relationships while urban social interaction is more likely to occur within organizational and associational networks. Similarly, some observers believe that social order in rural areas is typically maintained via informal control while formal controls and third-party enforcement are required to maintain order in urban communities. As we demonstrate in Chapter 3, empirical evidence does not support these preconceptions of rural versus urban differences in social structure.

Critiquing the Location Approach

The location approach to defining rural places and comparing these geographic entities with places that are not rural suffers from a number of inadequacies which, while not fatal, must be kept in mind as we use this framework in succeeding chapters to describe persistence and change in rural structure and examine rural versus urban differences in economy and society during recent decades.

First and foremost, this approach assumes that urban and rural places are grouped into dichotomous categories, that is that they can be discretely and unambiguously differentiated. This is simply not true. Regardless of which characteristics one uses to examine rural–urban differentiation – demographic, economic, political, or some other attribute – the boundary dividing the two categories is always somewhat arbitrary. Of course, this criticism could be leveled against almost any social science category. How old is elderly? Which jobs are professional? Who is an African American; an American Indian?

In our own classes in community and rural sociology at Cornell and Penn State, we often display a set of pictures of settlements and ask our students to indicate which are urban and which are rural. Without exception, students agree on the extremes but give variable responses in categorizing the places in between. Rurality, then, is a variable, not a discrete category, and various indicators can be used to array places as to their degree of rurality (or urbanity), not its presence or absence. Moreover, seeing rurality as a variable implies that there is an interstitial

zone of settlement between what is clearly urban and unmistakably rural. As you will see in later chapters (especially Chapters 2, 3, 5, and 8) political contention over land use, landscape management and economic development is particularly acute in these rapidly urbanizing spaces located in the urban periphery.

A related criticism of the "either/or" approach is that while the urban category is fully theorized, the rural category is simply a residual. In other words, rural becomes everything that is not urban with no attention given to the intrinsic characteristics that contribute to a place's rurality. As Halfacree (2004: 285) has observed, "we must move away from considering rural as necessarily a 'residual' and see it instead as an integral part of such settlement systems." Unfortunately, the residual approach to identifying rural areas is an almost universal practice in national statistical systems throughout the world.

Social scientists create analytical categories so that they can study social differentiation and social change within and between geographically based populations and over time. Their analytical goal is to minimize the variability (in population size and composition, economy, political process, and so on) within categories, while maximizing variability between categories. Be that as it may, social categories are not homogeneous, and this is certainly true of urban and rural. The U.S. government's classification of counties into metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas is a case in point. Even within our home states, New York and Pennsylvania, the metropolitan category groups together mega cities such as New York City and Philadelphia with Ithaca and State College (both metropolitan areas of about 100,000 population whose undiversified economies are dominated by Cornell and Penn State Universities). Obviously, the metropolitan category is hugely diverse with respect to demographics, economics, institutions and socio-cultural characteristics, but the nonmetropolitan sector is similarly diverse. Consider New York's *North Country*, the part of the state that forms its Northern border with Canada. All seven counties in this relatively isolated region are non-metropolitan, but they are not all the same. Hamilton County, for example, has a population of 5,162 while Jefferson County is home to over 114,000 residents. Or consider employment. One in ten jobs in Lewis County are in agriculture, which is almost three times the North Country's (and the state's) dependence on farming (Gavurnik 2008). In other words, urban versus rural differences are important, but they often mask important diversity within the rural and urban categories themselves. Finally, as discussed earlier in this chapter, it is important to remember that the location or place-based approach to defining and conceptualizing rural is only one approach, and many scholars put equal or greater store in rurality as a social and symbolic construction.

What Images and Attitudes Do People Have About Rural People and Places in Metropolitan Societies?

North Americans and Europeans hold favorable opinions about rural areas, opinions that are not always consistent with the material reality of rural places. In the U.K. for example, the British Attitudes Survey revealed that only five percent of people would choose to live in a big city if they had a free choice while 65 percent would live in small cities or country villages (Parkinson et al. 2006: 199). These

positive views can influence people's migration and employment decisions, and they can affect their political support of public programs that are designed to assist rural people and communities.

Beginning in the 1970s, social scientists in the United States began systematically to examine people's size of place preferences.[2] This issue was especially salient at the time because as will be discussed in Chapter 2, the nation's long-term trend of urban–rural population redistribution had begun to switch from urban concentration to deconcentration in the 1970s. Accordingly, researchers wanted to understand why the long-term trend of population concentration reversed. Was this "population turnaround" strictly motivated by economic factors, or were social factors and community amenities also involved? Research by Glenn Fuguitt and James Zuiches (1975) showed a strong public preference for rural areas and small towns, especially if the rural area is located within commuting distance of a larger city. Their national study showed that 75 percent of Americans would prefer to live in a place of less than 50,000 population even though only 56 percent actually lived in places of that size at the time of the survey. In addition, they demonstrated that persons who expressed a preference for rural living were drawn to perceived rural amenities and rebuffed by the negative aspects of urban environments while economic opportunities were much more closely associated with preferences for large cities.

More recent research has shown that preferences for small towns and rural areas have remained stable since the 1970s even though the direction of urban–rural migration changed during the twenty years studied (Fuguitt & Brown 1990; Brown et al. 1997). Furthermore this research showed that while most people prefer the size of place they currently live in, those who do not are almost twice as likely to prefer smaller rather than larger settings (Brown et al. 1997).

Many scholars have observed that preferences for small towns and rural areas are a mixture of pro-rural and anti-urban attitudes (Fuguitt & Zuiches 1975). In other words, while persons respond positively to what they perceive as intrinsic rural attributes, their residential preferences also contain a critique of what they consider to be negative aspects of urban living and urban environments. Willits and her colleagues (1990) dug into this issue by asking respondents to a Pennsylvania survey to agree or disagree with thirty-five statements about the positive and negative aspects of urban and rural life. They found that the same respondents who agreed with positive images of rural life held negative appraisals of urban life, and rejected negative images of rurality. Positive rurality was comprised of statements about the quality of family and community relationships, neighborliness, and closeness to nature, while anti-urbanism was comprised of statements focusing on the fast pace and high stress of urban living, the remoteness of urban relationships, the materialistic focus of urban life, and the poor quality and danger of urban environments. They found that people who agree with one pro-rural or anti-urban statement are highly likely to agree with others. In other words, individual responses to specific urban and rural attributes group together in ways that reflect global attitudes about rural and urban living with the overwhelming sentiment favoring rural and rejecting urban.

It should be noted that pro-rural and/or anti-urban attitudes are not always consistent with the material reality of urban and rural communities, partly

because people tend to form these attitudes from afar, not through actual experience (Logan 1996). As Logan commented, ". . . these 'facts' do not much matter, A large share of what we value is the mythology and symbolism of rural places rather than their reality" (p. 26).

What Logan is referring to is called the *rural mystique* in the U.S. or the *rural idyll* in Britain. The mystique is composed of treasured or almost sacred elements. It is an idealized form of community that stands in contrast to urban life. It is the antithesis of the modern urban world, somehow more moral, virtuous, and simple. In other words, rurality reflects what people feel has been lost in the transformation from rural to urban society. Similarly, the British rural idyll represents a balance between people and nature. As represented in poetry and painting, the idyll ignores the misery of rural poverty and presents emotional and sometimes sentimental renderings of people and landscapes in harmonious unity.

Resource economists have developed a framework for deconstructing the "value of rurality" into five dimensions of public goods which provide insights into why people are willing to spend their own money and/or support public policies for rural areas and environments.[3] Using this framework, economists contend that rural environments have natural resource, nostalgia, existence, option, and bequest value. Natural resource value means that persons are willing to pay more for access to rural landscapes. For example, they are willing to pay for a "room with a view." Nostalgia value means that people will spend their own money, or support public spending, to preserve visual reminders of the nation's heritage. As William Howarth (1996) has observed, rural areas are seen as a well of permanence and continuity which stems the fear of cultural loss. He contends that people cling to nostalgia more strongly during periods of rapid social and technological change. Paradoxically, they seek change but at the same time resist it. Existence value means that people simply value the knowledge that rural areas exist, regardless of their intentions to live, work, or visit. This logic is similar to laws that protect endangered species. Option value means that people who have never experienced rural environments as residents, visitors and/or workers place value on the option to do so in the future. Similarly, bequest value means that people are willing to support current expenditures to protect rural environments so that future generations will have the option of living, working, and/or visiting such places. This aspect of rural value is closely associated with notions of sustainability that will be discussed in Chapter 5.

How Do People Acquire Pro-Rural and Anti-Urban Attitudes?

Obviously, people are not born with innate predilections toward rural living and against urban environments. Moreover, while the majority of Americans and Britons may hold pro-rural and anti-urban attitudes, a significant minority disagree. Also, while rural communities are preferred locations in the U.S., U.K., and many other developed nations, the reverse is true in many parts of the developing world. Pro-rural attitudes have a long history in the United States. While early colonists tended to favor cities, pro-rural attitudes began to solidify during the American Revolution as an aspect of Enlightenment thought, and as a way of differentiating the United States from England. From the beginning, rural areas