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Amenity Migration in the Alps: Applying Models of Motivations and Effects to 2 Case Studies in Italy

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Using 2 models, this article illustrates different forms of in-migration in the Alps, the motivations for relocation, and effects of newcomers on their destination areas. Since the 1990s, more and more communities in the European Alps, which had suffered from depopulation for many decades, have become in-migration destinations. This new demographic trend is particularly pronounced in the French and Italian western Alps and on the periphery of the central Alps. Up to the end of the millennium, the western and southern Alps were considered the major demographic problem areas within the Alpine arc. During the past decade, however, the picture has changed significantly: while communities in the western Alps have gradually recovered from massive outmigration, the situation now appears precarious in the eastern Alps. Even though many regions in the eastern Alps are still characterized by depopulation, we can find demographic processes similar to those in the western Alps, where in-migration contributes to population gains in peripheral mountain villages. This article demonstrates 2 models developed to explain these trends by applying the models to 2 villages in the Italian Alps. Model 1 outlines the diverse composition and dynamics of the population, potential migration flows, and the main motivations for relocation. Model 2 depicts the impacts of amenity migrants on socioeconomic, cultural, and infrastructural aspects in a mountain village as well as on the cultural landscape and building stock. In order to allow regional comparisons of individual hamlets, villages, or valleys, the degree of the models’ abstraction was kept low; this also enables their application to other mountain areas.

Keywords: Amenity migration; new highlanders; demographic turnaround; European Alps; Ostana; Dordolla; Italy.

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Concepts

In-migration and its effects in high-mountain ranges has become an important issue in the past decades. It is assumed that outmigration from mountain areas linked to industrialization will be replaced by a late-modern in-migration phase characterized by globalization. A recently released volume edited by Moss and Glorioso (2014) contains examples of this trend from all over the world. The study reported on in this article focused on the European Alps but derived patterns that can be applied to most populated peripheral mountain areas. The models developed in this study are presented for the first time in this article and applied to 2 case studies in the Italian Alps.

The concepts of counterurbanization (Berry 1976) and amenity migration (Moss 1994, 2004) offer the basic framework for our study of current demographic changes. Both terms describe the rediscovery and reevaluation of rural areas as residential and commercial space by mostly urban people (“urban refugees”). Similar to counterurbanization, amenity migration constitutes a relatively new field of research (Sofranko and Williams 1980; Moss 1994, 2006; Perlik 2006, 2011; Löffler and Steinicke 2007; McIntyre 2009, 2011; Gosnell and Abrams 2011; Moss and Glorioso 2014) that includes multilocal dwellers and thus represents a type of mobility not necessarily associated with a permanent change of residence. Amenity migration therefore seems to be an appropriate term for the current demographic turnaround in the Alps and its effects.

Terminological difficulties exist in some cases. As stated, the term “amenity migration” not only encompasses permanent migrations, which largely correspond with the counterurban pattern, but also seasonal and intermittent relocations, which involve multiple residences. Although a modified interpretation of amenity migration also includes re-migrants, migration of retired people, and relationship migrants, it is difficult to distinguish it from leisure mobility. From this perspective, amenity residences and tourism/leisure-oriented secondary residences overlap. Moreover, in well-developed Alpine areas and in distinct tourist regions, economically driven in-migration dominates, which makes it difficult to identify the influence of amenity migrants. For this reason, our research team has carried out most of its case studies in distinctly peripheral parts of the Alps, where spatial labor mobility is the exception.
The dimension and cultural implications of the “new highlander” phenomenon in the peripheral areas of the Alps have already been the object of a number of publications (e.g., Steinicke et al. 2011, 2012; Čede et al. 2014).

Figures 1 and 2 show how strongly in-migration has shaped demographic development in the Alps. In the past 4 decades, the traditionally depopulated areas of the French Alps have become a significant in-migration destination (Cognard 2014; Dissart 2014; Warmuth et al. 2016). Our studies prove further that since around 1990 the Italian western Alps have undergone a similar population change. A decade later this demographic transition also spread into the Italian eastern Alps and the Slovenian Julian Alps, although there, due to birth deficits, population losses generally still prevail. Thus, the demographic turnaround in the Alps primarily affects the migration balance (Table 1). Regardless, the effects of unfavorable biodemographic factors (birth deficits) resulting from the outmigration period can still be observed in many mountain areas, including our 2 study villages.

While “new highlanders” (Bender and Kanitscheider 2012: 235) are omnipresent in the central Alps, in Switzerland and in western Austria, a completely different development is taking place in the eastern Austrian Alps. This contrast has been discussed in detail elsewhere (cf. Čede et al. 2014).

Few attempts have been made to model the phenomenon of amenity migration. Besides the basic model of amenity migration (Moss 1994: 124), McIntyre’s (2009: 240) model should be mentioned, in which the linking of amenity migration to the kinds of migration involving multiple residences is in the foreground. Bender and Kanitscheider (2012: 236) designed a model that depicts different types of mobility according to motivation for migration, age category, and permanence of mobility. Besides, the study of Beismann et al. (2012: XIX) presented the current population composition ideal—typically in an Italian Alpine valley. According to this study, the increase in secondary or multiple residences and amenity residences occurs primarily in the interior of a valley, where “landscape amenities” (Zäch et al. 2015) attract more newcomers. A further development of the new highlander model (cf. Löffler et al. 2014), with a
focus on the main motivation for relocation as well as the impacts of the newcomers, is discussed in the following section.

As our research focuses on the revitalization of abandoned villages and land, on socioeconomic and sociocultural development in peripheral mountain communities, on the transformation of local structures, and on all aspects related to how locally born and raised and new in-migrants live together, this study, along with our further research questions, can be seen as a contribution to the Dynamic Planet theme of the Future Earth Agenda (Future Earth 2014).

Models of amenity migration

Within the framework of 4 projects of the Austrian Science Fund (FWF projects P16155-G04, P16664, P20954, and P25315), the authors conducted more than 30 case studies in all parts of the Alps. From the results they derived 2 models that can be applied to other mountain regions experiencing amenity migration. The models are presented here using case studies of 2 villages: Ostana in the western Alps and Dordolla in the eastern Alps.

Model 1 (Figure 3) shows the diverse composition of the population, potential migration flows from and to the outside, and transitions between types within a settlement. Besides the local residents who were born and raised in the village and live there throughout the year,
there are second-home owners irregularly in residence and migrant workers, amenity migrants in the broad sense (including re-migrants and relationship-migrants), and the “real” amenity migrants, primarily from outside the Alps who consciously decided to transfer their lives to the mountains. The majority of these newcomers, many of whom have children, are either self-employed or telecommuters. They often implement innovative business ideas and thus create local jobs. Some start a new agricultural business, some work as artisans, and others take any employment they can find to achieve their dream of living an alpine life.

In a category where local and amenity-migrant populations overlap are re-migrants and relationship migrants. Re-migrants include people who once emigrated in search of work and later return, often after retirement, as well as members of later generations who relocate to the native village of their parents or grandparents, mostly after inheriting property. Relationship migrants are people who migrate because of a relationship or marriage with someone in the community. Among amenity migrants, not all second-home owners are the same: some are focused on tourism and leisure and stay for relatively short periods of time, while others stay longer, work (or live as retirees) in the second home, and participate in the social life of the village. However, a clear distinction between the 2 categories is not possible.

The model also takes into account the changes and shifts that occur over time. For example, the owner of a holiday home can over time become a permanent, seasonal (one or more periods per year), or intermittent resident (moving between several residences more frequently). Moreover, from conversations with new immigrants it can quite often be deduced that holiday trips are undertaken specifically to assess a potential future residence.

In-migration is heavily dependent on the attractiveness of the municipality as well as potential migrants’ financial situation and real-estate prices and the cost of living. The reference to the main motivation of amenity migrants that leads to relocation to a certain community was integrated into a ring surrounding the corresponding circle in the model. Thus, with change of the color shade, each decisive aspect—housing, work, leisure, landscape, or social atmosphere—that led to immigration can be emphasized and often simultaneously.

FIGURE 3  Population composition and motivations for amenity migration in Ostana and Dordolla (Model 1, illustration by the authors).
Contrary to model 1, model 2 is more self-explanatory; it outlines the various effects of amenity migrants on the cultural landscape, building stock, and social, economic, cultural, and infrastructural aspects of peripheral mountain villages and shows the different intensities of the individual aspects (Figure 4).

indicate the essential strengths of the community or region.
The following section applies these models to specific villages.

**Case studies: Dordolla and Ostana villages**

The 2 mountain villages chosen to demonstrate our 2 models are both in Italy, but in very different parts of the Alps. Dordolla (612 m above sea level [masl]) is approximately 100 m above the Àupa Valley floor and is part of the municipality of Moggio Udinese in the rugged Friulian region of the eastern Alps; Ostana (1250 masl) is in the upper reaches of the River Po in the Piedmontese western Alpine valley of the same name. With industrialization, both areas saw massive depopulation; Ostana was almost reduced to a ghost town. In the Friulian mountains, the 1976 earthquakes destroyed the settlement area and accelerated the exodus. At the turn of the millennium, one village was nearly extinct and the other seemed to have few prospects—but both are now attracting new residents.

During investigative visits to both villages, long-time residents and newcomers participated in semistructured interviews and answered standardized multiple-choice questionnaires about population trends in their areas. Residents who were absent during our visits were invited to complete an online questionnaire. With the integration of social media into our methodology, it was possible to locate newcomers, interact with them, stay in contact, and build a network. Qualitative, empirical fieldwork was carried out to verify our interpretation of the official Italian statistics, since the census data are not always accurate. Additional data were acquired through the analysis of aerial photographs and remote-sensing images of the research areas. To provide an idea of the current situation and the condition of the villages we investigated, function and land-use mapping was an important presentation method (Figure 5).

This survey was exhaustive rather than based on randomized sampling. All amenity migrants in Dordolla (n = 31) and Ostana (n = 48) participated in semistructured interviews in summer 2015. In addition, approximately 25 interviews were conducted with second-home owners in Ostana who were leisure oriented or had re-migrated. They were selected based on their presence during the investigation in summer 2015.

One-third of the 57 year-round residents of Dordolla can be called amenity migrants (Figure 3). This high proportion is also reflected in the functional mapping of the houses or residential units (Figure 5): local residents inhabit 18 buildings (approximately 20% of the total stock), newcomers living there year-round inhabit 17.

Ostana recorded its highest population in 1921 with 1187 residents (Comune di Ostana 2016); in the 1980s, only 5 year-round residents were left. The population of Ostana has risen to around 120 inhabitants, 37 of them living there year-round. The children of the year-round residents of both villages (7 each in Dordolla and Ostana) have inevitably contributed to a more active village life, and Ostana welcomed its first baby in 28 years at the end of January 2016.

**Motivations for migration**

Motivations for in-migration, whether full-time or intermittent, were similar in the 2 study villages. Social and landscape factors were the primary motivations for amenity migrants—for example, the desire to live “a life with people instead of against them,” to “grow one’s own vegetables,” “have more time for meaningful work and thereby to require less money,” or simply practice “agriculture.” Interviewees emphasized that the small population was not a problem; the closer social contacts (often because of the need for joint action in the village) made up for it. Furthermore, the traditional and down-to-earth way of life was seen as desirable. Other benefits mentioned by survey participants included landscape aesthetics, the pleasant or interesting climate, tranquility, health aspects, and life philosophies ensuing from the naturalness and the rhythm of the seasons: “Of course I could also grow some of my vegetables in flower pots on my [city] balcony. Apart from that smaller amount, I finally feel I am living a bit from the local soil and thus have formed a relationship with it.”

Work-related factors may at first seem irrelevant to in-migration, because jobs are not abundant in the study areas. Nevertheless, many newcomers create meaningful and satisfying work in the vicinity of their new residences, usually to do with handicrafts, art, or executive functions in tourism and agriculture.

Housing forms another substantial reason for in-migrating, driven by a favorable property market, an inheritance, or the desire for a house and garden or a life in the countryside: “In my small city apartment I could only decide whether to place the table by the wall or by the window, and when I step outside the door today, I do not know where to start to organize my living environment [because there are so many options].”

Leisure-oriented factors obviously also play a prominent role in decisions to move to the mountains. As the most important reason for a move, leisure is explicitly mentioned most often in the French Alps (Warmuth et al 2016).

**Effects of migration**

The effects of in-migration (Figure 4) can be demonstrated in a laboratory-like manner in these 2 peripheral settlements, which due to their small and aging populations probably would no longer have been capable of endogenous development without it.

In Dordolla, the new residents helped promote almost all new developments, usually together with long-time local residents. We found an especially strong correlation
between social and landscape motivations for in-migration and the effect of in-migration on culture and society: people usually soon become an active part of whatever drew them to the village. According to our observation and interviews, long-time local residents welcome any kind of progress; this is certainly a relic from earlier, more pessimistic times. “Since the newcomers arrived,” said a native from Dordolla, “life has come back to the village,
old customs are reawakened, and new feasts and cultural events are celebrated.” Events initially attended only by a handful of people now attract hundreds of visitors, who come from nearby areas but also from Austria and Slovenia to enjoy arts and culture and participate in theater performances, workshops, concerts, and other events.

In Ostana, the mayor is primarily responsible for the current revival. He did not want to allow his native village to become extinct and has not only applied for financial assistance but also sought to attract new residents, reinforced by a commitment to the “right of preemption” for real estate for those wishing to settle year-round. In the 9 hamlets of Ostana, 30 years ago, only 7 buildings were occupied, and many were largely ruined; this decay is now hardly noticeable. The majority of the houses were renovated with financial support from regional and European authorities, and numerous infrastructure-improvement projects were initiated. However, these developments proceeded very rapidly, so they are already far ahead of the rest of the village’s revitalization. Nevertheless, with the construction activities, synergies arose in the realms of economy, society, and culture, which resulted in considerably positive effects for the village and its inhabitants. Numerous festivals and other events are testimony to a functioning community.

In Dordolla, the probability of gaining subsidies for infrastructure and renovations also grows with every new family. Here the impact on the external appearance of the village shows to a lesser extent than in Ostana because the renovation and revitalization measures are funded and carried out entirely by private initiatives. In this regard, we realized that leisure-oriented second-home owners should not always be considered a burden on the community: the higher municipal tax rate for secondary residences, for example, could help to finance some revitalization measures. In many nearly abandoned Alpine villages, leisure-oriented second-home owners basically blaze a trail to revitalization (cf. Löffler et al. 2015).

In Dordolla, the effects of newcomers arriving are also apparent in the expansion of the surrounding cultural landscape, largely thanks to one new farmer who, with the support of both new and long-established residents, revitalizes arable land and terraces, clears and regenerates ancient cultural paths, drives back the forest in the nearby settlement area, and renders land that was fallow for decades suitable for farming and grazing. As the only farmer in the village, he seeks to revalorize old cultural and agricultural areas and, thanks to an agritourism venture, also increasingly attracts guests to Dordolla. Another newcomer restores and creates new dry-stone walls, and yet another makes documentary films.

In Ostana, the cultural landscape remains precarious, as is common in western Alpine valleys. While ideas for agricultural revitalization exist, they have not yet been implemented apart from one exception: shepherds produce a local brand of cheese. In both study villages, development of new farm activities is difficult as the parcels are highly fragmented and are not for sale; often the owners cannot be identified.

As shown in Figure 4, amenity migrants have created changes in various aspects of village life in Dordolla and Ostana. These changes are not identical as they are dependent both on the ideas and perceptions of the in-migrants and on local political, economic, and social conditions. Nevertheless, by observing and analyzing existing innovations, Alpine villages and towns can choose those that show the greatest promise, possibly with modifications, for their own locations.

**Conclusion and further research questions**

Since the 1990s more and more communities in the Alps that had suffered from depopulation have become immigration destinations. Originating in the French western Alps, this trend spread across the Alps and encompassed the eastern part of the Italian Alps and eventually the adjacent Julian Alps in Slovenia. While many empirically based publications have noticed this demographic reversal and its impacts, there has been a lack of models to illustrate the phenomenon of amenity migration. This study is an effort to help fill that gap.

The 2 models presented here were derived inductively from a variety of case studies from peripheral parts of the Alps and then applied to 2 new case studies, 1 each in the eastern and western Italian Alps. Model 1 (Figure 3) outlines population and migration dynamics and the main motivations for migration, while model 2 (Figure 4) summarizes the impacts of amenity migrants on local socioeconomic, cultural, and infrastructural factors as well as on the cultural landscape and building stock. In order to allow comparisons of individual hamlets, villages, or valleys, the degree of the models’ abstraction was kept low; for this reason, they can also be applied to other mountain areas.

Thus, the models illustrate the new development in laboratory-like manner on the basis of 2 Alpine villages that were almost completely depopulated in the 1970s and then experienced a demographic turnaround. The models allow a comparison of specific, empirically derived case studies without ignoring the sociodemographic characteristics of each village. They include all relevant aspects, other than political and natural-landscape framework conditions, in order to illustrate the state and development of individual sociocultural and spatial units so that the results can be a basis for planning policy.

In future analyses, the environmental dimension of the new in-migration should be taken into greater account, including the natural hazards occurring in alpine regions. With regard to the socioeconomic dimension of the in-migration, research to date has focused on its contribution to revitalizing industry, trade, and
commerce, as well as on its promotion of tourism and cultural activities. Little attention has so far been directed to the development of agriculture in this new phase. While the outmigration period was characterized by farm closures and reduction in cultivated area, resulting in abandoned land and scrub and forest expansion into formerly cultivated areas, we can conclude from our own observations that a new type of agriculture is developing in peripheral Alpine areas. Therefore, an essential question will be the extent to which amenity migration generates new farming activities that contribute to, maintain, and/or modify the Alpine cultural landscape in order to strengthen the pull factors for further in-migration as well as potentially reducing vulnerability to natural hazards. This appears to be a prerequisite for a sustainable settlement.

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