

GEOGRAPHY AND RURAL LAND USE: AN OVERVIEW

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During a Rural Libraries and the Humanities workshop on June 18, 1982, Dr. Shirey talked to librarians about the different aspects of geography and rural land useage. He offers insight into attitudes about land development by relating the history of land use and the land use ethic.

INTRODUCTION

There are three key words in the title of this presentation that need definition and amplification in order to put the overview into perspective.

The first key word is geography. Some disadvantaged persons might say it is a topic which they were last exposed to in elementary school. Some quasi-educated college students at Clarion State might say it consists of some academic course they were exposed to and are now being "recycled" in during summer school. The more erudite person of an intellectual persuasion might define geography as the study of the nature and characteristics of physical and cultural features distributed over the landscape. Topics in geography run the gamit from physical components such as geology, meteorology, oceanography, and cartography, to cultural components such as urban geography, historical geography and demography, to economic and political components such as industrialization and manufacturing, trade and transportation, and political geography.

However, to the professionally trained geographer the heart of geography is more than the development of an expertise in the various components which

make up his field. He is primarily interested in the interactions and interrelationships of the various components in their natural setting. Hence, conceptual ideas such as areal distribution and spatial relationships become part of his basic vocabulary and modus operandi. In the first case area distributions of physical and cultural features or components basically describes their geographic location within a given area, be it a county, a state or a region.

One of the major roles of the geographer, and consequently of geography itself as a social science, is to map and then analyse and interpret the significance of the resultant patterns of the physical or cultural features on the landscape.

A second major role of geographers is to explain the level of significance of the spatial relationships which exist between and among the physical and cultural features after their locations have been established and mapped.

A third major role of geographers is to determine the impact the areal distribution and spatial relationship of physical and cultural features have on the type and extent of land use development within a particular unit of land. In other words what sets of factors or variables are most accountable for the existing land use at a particular time at a particular place. The essence of geography then is man-land relationships or man's adaptation to or modification of his environment.

The second key word in the title is rural. This word has several connotations and can be perceived in a variety of ways. Rural could suggest a farm landscape. Or it might imply a country setting. Or perhaps the less densely settled areas beyond the suburbs which in geographic parlance is

called exurbia. But if one approaches it in a geographical sense using demographic categories of population - urban, rural, and rural non-farm, as devised by the United States census of population, - then its usage in this paper will be less confusing. According to the Census Bureau those areas having population concentrations of less than 2,500 persons are considered rural. Thus in this context, if urban or urbanization can be used to describe those land areas with population concentrations, then conversely, rural or ruralization can be used to describe those land areas with a paucity of population. In a broad general sense, rural describes those land areas with the least population pressure in terms of permanent settlement, usually expressed in persons per square mile.

The 1980 census figures indicate the United States population is distributed as follows: about 75 percent urban; 20 percent rural non-farm; and 5 percent rural. This is somewhat misleading because in terms of land use over 80 percent of all Americans live on less than two percent of the land. In other words, very few people are categorized as rural, but most of the land is classified as rural.

The third key word in the title is land use. By definition it suggests that man alters, changes or regulates his environment. The term "use" refutes the thesis of environmental determinism. Land use concepts hence stress primarily man's use of the land via both economic and non-economic activities.

Geographers have historically charted man's permanent settlement and subsequent use of the land on isochronic maps. These maps actually plot the advance of permanent settlement over a designated time interval.

Once permanent settlement becomes established in a given area, then different types of land use begin to occur over time. This type of change in one place is termed sequent occupancy or sequent land use. Recording such changes over time helps the geographer measure and analyse the amount and rate of land use change and provides a valuable historical record.

LAND USE HISTORY

In order to gain a better insight into present attitudes and practices, an understanding of the history of the land use and the land use ethic is necessary.

The Indians were first to make their mark on the American landscape. Private ownership was not a concept in their society: "The idea that land could be bought and sold was an alien concept to the Indians of America. They clung possessively to certain chattels, but lands were nearly always held in common. An individual might have the use of a farm plot, but at this death it reverted back to the community."¹ The environment changed little under Indian stewardship.

The colonists from Europe had quite a different view. They had seen their society in Europe grow and transform with technological, political and social changes. Their experience had included land ownership by some and servitude by others. Though the feudal system was reaching its end, it was still very much in the minds of the settlers. Owning land was a measure of wealth and, to them, was an end in itself.

The new world had a two-fold effect on the settlers. The forest and the wilderness represented a threatening force that had to be conquered if they

were to feel secure; it also represented the great vastness and abundances of resources that the new land possessed.

As the colonies developed they claimed western land that was yet unsettled. The first controls imposed by state government began in the colonial period, including state government taxation of land, taking of private land for public purposes and regulating laws on inheritance of land.

The Revolution had a great effect on evolving settlement patterns in the United States. The new government was faced with heavy debts from the war and depreciated currency. When the Union was formed, the colonies claiming vast quantities of land to the west gave up their claims to the Federal government. It is important to note that at the very basis of the new government was the firm belief in private property. The question at the time wasn't whether, but how, the government should dispose of its land to private citizens. Land

Disposal

The first method of disposition of public lands was through land sales, which became a main source of revenue for the government. In the 1820s the scale of land led to a high level of economic speculation. Land speculators at this time wanted to accumulate large tracts of land along the Atlantic coast where values would be highest. The settlers were more interested in the government opening and selling land in the western areas.

Settlers began moving west faster than the government could survey and put the land up for sale, and they were given priorities in the Pre-emption Act of 1841. This act allowed the settlers to buy land on which they had already settled for \$1.25 per acre.

The second method of land disposition consisted of land grants. Grants were given to the state to support public education; they were also made for various modes of transportation. Grants for roads at this time were small, but lands granted to the railroads were substantial. The government was more than generous with the railroads at this time simply because it was felt this was the best way to settle the country.

The following acts were passed in response to increasing pressure on the government for free land:

Homestead Act of 1862 - provided 160 acres of land free of charge to settlers; they had to reside on the land for five years before the title passed to them. Many settlers claimed pre-emption rights after six months, bought the land for \$1.25 per acre, and then sold to land speculators.

Timber Culture Act of 1873 - gave 160 acres to an individual if he would plant trees on one-quarter of the land.

Desert Land Act of 1877 - provided 640 acres to a settler if he would irrigate one-eighth of it.

A series of government land acquisitions accounts for the size of the continental United States as it is today: Louisiana Purchase, 1803; Florida Purchase, 1819; Texas, 1845; Pacific Northwest, 1846; Pacific Southwest, 1846. These purchases gave the United States the land area it has today, with the exception of the extracontinental possessions.²

The Land Ethic

It is important to understand the land ethic that was established in the U.S. As was mentioned earlier, there was never any question that land should not be privately owned. How the land was used was up to the individual, despite the early controls by state governments. Since land was plentiful and cheap a "use it up, throw it away" attitude was established. There was always

more land, more trees, more water and more minerals. Land speculation became a common (and basically accepted) practice in our early history. Much of this attitude still prevails.

→ Growth was an early goal of the United States. It was important to settle the west quickly, and, thus, a plan for growth and settlement was not devised. Even after the western lands had been settled, the concept of "planned growth" was held in disdain.³

Opinions on how rural land should be used generally falls into three categories: (1) the economic ethic - "use it" ethic, whereby every parcel of land should be used or developed so as to bring its owner maximum profit; (2) the conservationist ethic - "preserve it" ethic, whereby large portions of underdeveloped land should stay undeveloped with the emphases is on trusteeship to preserve the beauty and ecological health of the land; and (3) the ecological ethic - "sustain it" ethic, whereby the land is treated with respect and a balance is struck between human needs and the needs of other living creatures in order to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the world's ecosystem.⁴

RURAL LAND USE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

In 1965 the Urban Renewal Administration and the Bureau of Public Roads published the Standard Land Use Coding Manual.⁵ It was a detailed system for identifying and coding land use activities. Under what could be called non-urban or rural land uses, the following categories were delimited - recreational, resource production and extraction, and undeveloped land and water areas.

Subcategories under recreational included such things as parks and recreational activities. Subcategories under resource production and extraction included agriculture, forestry, fishing, and mining. Subcategories under undeveloped land and water areas included noncommercial forests, unused and undeveloped land areas, and water areas.

WHO OWNS THE RURAL LANDS

There are an estimated 1.3 billion acres of privately owned land in the United States. This does not include land actually owned by federal, state, and local governments. Farmers are the biggest owners of rural land, possessing more than a billion acres or 38 percent of all privately held acreage. Although technically 44 percent of farm and rangeland is owned by nonfarmers.

Next in importance are retirees, who hold 190 million acres, or 14 percent of all private land. Then come corporations which own 142 million acres, or 11 percent of the total. At least 68 million of these acres are commercial forestland owned by wood-processing companies. Also in this category are the rather extensive holdings of mining and petroleum companies, railroad, and agricultural corporations. The only other group to control over 10 million acres are real estate dealers themselves. Parks, wilderness, and recreation areas comprise only 4.6 million acres or 3.6 percent of the total.

THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MAN AND RURAL LAND USES

As was noted earlier, geography deals primarily with man-land relationships. These relationships are usually expressed in terms of activities and can be illustrated in a hierarchical arrangement from the very closest to the

most remote relationship between man and the land he uses. The hierarchy would be as follows: hunters and gatherers, nomadic herders, migratory agriculture, subsistence agriculture, extractive industries, commercial agriculture and recreation.

As man has engaged in these rural land use activities he has largely neglected to realize that land is a finite and vulnerable resource and many of its resources are renewable only if the land is not abused.

TRENDS IN RURAL LAND USE

If the rural lands of the United States were divided among the 226 million people each would get less than ten acres. Some of the land would be desert, some tundra, some wetlands, and some barren mountain slopes. Other land would be beautiful forests or fertile cropland. By world standards, what each person would get would be far better than the rest of the world because their productivity is so much less than ours.

So what does the future for rural land use? There are some prophets of doom -- citing figures like there will be one third fewer farms in twenty years or we will see a reduction of farmland from 465 million acres in 1980 to 386 million acres in less than twenty years. Yet other scholars say net changes from one use to another by the year 2000 will be too small to change the general picture. Net losses that do occur will likely be in areas of grazing and forestry because these cannot compete effectively for land that is in demand for urban, recreation and cropland use.

In the final analysis we must realize there is a fixed and limited amount of rural land. Yet there are unlimited demands upon it for a variety of uses.

KEEPING IN TOUCH WITH REALITY

Inventory and weeding are often dreaded library tasks that are nonetheless essential in collection management. The prospect of taking inventory in a library that cannot be shut down for the duration of the count does present some problems, but they are not insurmountable. Inventories and weeding are important steps in maintaining an up-to-date collection and records.

1. Inventory. First, select a time when library use tends to be slow, perhaps during summer vacation or around Christmas. This depends on the individual library. Schedule no programs or public projects for the time of the inventory so that staff members will have no more than basic routines to distract them. If possible, corral volunteers to take over desk duty during the inventory period. In an inventory has never been done, staff preparation is essential so that everyone involved knows exactly what the purpose of the inventory is and how it will be done.

Here is a suggested procedure: have staff members work in pairs, or if the staff numbers two, draft two of the best volunteers, one to work with each staff member. Take one section--fiction, nonfiction, reference, juvenile, etc.-- at a time, after the shelves are put in order, have one person read the title of the book in the order they appear on the shelf. The other person will check each card in the shelf list,

FOOTNOTES

1. Stewart L. Udall, The Quiet Crisis (New York: Avon Books, 1963), p. 18.
2. Martin J. Redding and B. Thomas Parry, "Land Use: A Vital Link to Environmental Quality," in Land Use and the Environment: An Anthology of Readings (Washington, D.C.: The Environmental Protection Agency, 1973), pp. 6-8.
3. Ibid., p. 8.
4. G. Tyler Miller, Jr., Living in the Environment (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1982), pp. 181-184.
5. Urban Renewal Administration, Standard Land Use Coding Manual (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965), pp. 30-31.