Rural Matters?:
To whom and for what?

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Questions?

- What images come to mind when you hear the world “rural”?
- Do urban people value rural America and if so why?
- What is/should be the social contract between rural & urban areas?
What images come to mind when you hear the world “rural”?
W.W. Kellogg Foundation study of rural, suburban and urban residents’ perceptions of rural America

- Rural life represents traditional American values, but is behind the times;
- Rural life is more relaxed and slower than city life, but harder and more grueling;
- Rural life is friendly, but intolerant of outsiders and difference;
- Rural life is richer in community life, but epitomized by individuals struggling independently to make ends meet.
W.W. Kellogg Foundation Study

- Overwhelmingly positive views of rural life, seeing it as a repository of strong values and religious faith, close-knit communities, hard work and self-sufficiency,
- Admiration of rural Americans and romanticization of rural life is tempered by their understanding that rural Americans face serious economic hardships and threats to their way of life.
- Lack of financial resources and other opportunities topped respondents’ list of problems facing rural America: Lack of money and poverty (19 percent), over-development/sprawl (17 percent), price of crops (14 percent), droughts/weather (11 percent) and lack of opportunities (11 percent).
The W.W. Kellogg Foundation Study

- Agriculture plays the predominant role in respondents’ perception of rural America.
  - Two-thirds of respondents named agriculture, farming, or ranching as the main industry of rural America. Deeply ingrained in national psyche
    - 2.2 million places are ‘farms’
    - 1.1 million people list farming as principle job
    - Only 6% of all rural jobs are in farming, and when agric. Services, forestry and fishing added the percentage is but 8%
    - Adding in agric. Inputs, processing and marketing, wholesale and retail trade, and indirect agribusiness the total is 23% (1 in 4 rural jobs)
W.W. Kellogg Foundation Study

- The concerns about poor pay are matched by a near universal perception that rural areas face serious limitations in access to healthcare and quality education.
  - Six-in-10 respondents, including 63 percent of rural respondents, believe that rural residents have fewer opportunities than suburban and urban residents, only 6 percent (including 8 percent of rural respondents) believe rural residents have more opportunities.
Do urban residents care about rural areas?

- Size: population and land area
- Natural resources
- Nostalgic image of rural areas & small towns
- Very foundation of society
- Better people
- Moral backbone of the nation
- Hope that virtue still resides somewhere
- Preference for rural and small town life
Size: Population and land area

- 55 million people, 28 million jobs, 13,000 local governments, 2,288 counties.
- 83 percent of U.S. land (a large portion of it owned collectively by the citizens—urban and rural—of the nation).
Natural resources

- Bulk of this nation's natural resources: its forests, mountains, streams, deserts, canyons, lakes, and cropland and the wildlife that live there, the treatment of which today elicits great scrutiny.
Nostalgic image of rural areas

The image of small town living a la Norman Rockwell and Sheriff Andy Taylor: In this popular stereotype, friendliness, morality, and a saner pace of life prevail. As such, the small town is a powerful icon tugging at our collective heartstrings. For many, it represents the very essence of "community"—a near-mythical entity that elicits both longing and praise.
Foundation of society

- For others, the importance of small towns goes even further, representing the very foundation of society. The late journalist and author Richard Critchfield argued that "rural life is the source, and the only source, of such aspects of our culture as religious beliefs, the agricultural moral code, the institutions of family and property, and the work ethic."
Better people

- In a 1992 national poll, the Roper Organization found that a majority of people questioned (most of whom were urbanites) felt that rural communities had friendlier people, better personal values, a stronger sense of family, better quality of life, better community spirit, and greater honesty in business. In addition, half believed that rural people are more religious.
Moral backbone of the nation.

A 1993 survey by the National Opinion Research Center found that rural people were much more likely than urban to identify themselves as religious fundamentalists, believe in life after death, oppose abortion, and regard homosexuality as wrong. For some, these conservative religious and political stands are further evidence that rural America is the moral backbone of the nation, and her people the "...bulwark against foreign 'isms and crackpot programs" that Ezra Benson, Eisenhower's Secretary of Agriculture, claimed.
Rural preference

- Since the 1940s, survey after survey has shown that more Americans would prefer to live in rural and small towns than actually do. And today, more and more of those Americans are acting on those preferences: from 1990 to 1999, 2.2 million more Americans moved from the city to the country than the reverse. Indeed, three-quarters of all rural counties added people. Places with mountains, lakes, seashores, and nice climates are, naturally, the most popular destinations.
Virtue still resides somewhere

- According to USDA's Calvin Beale, the dean of rural demographers, "The favorable attributes ascribed to rural America and its people constitute an ideal list of four-square virtues. To the extent that these virtues are not attributed as commonly to big city people, it is no great leap to conclude that the urban majority itself finds some consolation and hope in the belief that such virtues still prevail at least somewhere in the nation."
Contrasting images of rural.

- Bastion of virtue or of backwardness?
- Significant gaps between urban and rural in some areas.
- Little differences between urban & rural rates in other areas.
Contrasting images

- Bastion of virtue or of backwardness?
  - The conservative values found in rural areas—the religious and political stands and "four-square virtues"—are, for some, the vertebrae in the moral backbone of the nation.
  - For others, however, such conservatism looks more like backward thinking and red necks.
Contrasting images

- Significant gaps between urban and rural
  - Wages & incomes are lower
  - Access to health care is lower
  - Unemployment rates are higher
  - Dependence on government transfer payments is higher
  - Poverty rates are higher
  - Crime rates are lower but increasing in rural areas
Contrasting images

- Little differences between urban & rural rates of
  - alcohol and drug use by youths,
  - births to teen mothers, and
  - domestic violence.
Why do urban people value rural?

- Nostalgia for rural roots increases during periods of rapid social and economic change.
- Celebrating rural is a way of criticizing urban-industrial life.
- Pro-rural values are a protective mechanism against cultural loss.
- The value of rural areas is their prospect for symbolizing social & natural stability.
Nostalgia for rural roots increases during periods of rapid social and economic change. Expressing rural values is a mechanism used to stem fears of cultural loss.

As nation grows more technological, its economy turns from producing goods to services, those trends guarantee the tenacity of rural values.

A paradox is clear: faster, busier, more artificial and technological lives will cling ever more strongly to nostalgia. While we embrace change we also resist it; wanting to be close to the soil is a fable that secures the hopes and fears aroused by history.

Societies that develop deliberately court change and modernization inevitably brings the crowded, swifter pace of urban life. Rural values monitor that social change, claming fears of progress with the stability of nature.

Rural values mediate our fear of change; they celebrate what has vanished and could not exist without the diminished here and now.
Danboom: Why Americans Value Rural Life

- Celebrating rural is a way of criticizing urban-industrial life
  - Agrarians like Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson criticize rural America for manifesting negative traits historically associated with cities
  - Urban industrial, capitalist culture is so pervasive and hegemonic that it has largely overwhelmed the rural society that has traditionally been viewed as its antidote

- Agrarianism fills a vacuum that in other western societies is filled by developed ideologies critical of industrial capitalism
  - America lacks a traditional, conservative and/or reactionary critique of industrial capitalism because it lacks a traditional conservative and/or reactionary class
  - The US has never been congenial to the Marxist critique of industrial capitalism and will most likely never be.
Logan: Rural America as a Symbol of American Values

- Pro-rural values are a protective mechanism against cultural loss regardless of the fact that a large share of what is value is the mythology and symbolism of rural places rather than their rurality.
  - American culture has long held an anti-urban bias, and to a great extent what we value in rural settings is defined by what we suspect that we have lost in the city: Hard work, family, community, nature, & safety.
  - Some aspects of urban life are also appealing to us, and in some respects, they reflect the same values that we cherish in the countryside
  - Rural America has a greater appeal because we know it only at a distance which sets us free to reconstruct it in our imagination. A large share of what we value is the mythology and symbolism of rural places rather than their reality
Gottfried: Corridors of Value – Rural Land in Rural Life

- Most rural landscapes are constructed – show a many layered history of human intervention
  - Values of rural areas derive from intense experiences with the spatial and physical properties of landscapes. Taken together they constitute a powerful memory of place. Because of human modification, landscapes are a constructed phenomenon; they are a repository of human perception & activity layered over time; are the result of successive adaptation & accommodations derived from settlements, patterns of fields, crops and roads, the presence of industry

- The value of rural areas is their prospect for symbolizing social & natural stability
  - One of their fundamental values to society lies in recognizing the historical relationships between land & quality of life. The value of land & rural life with which it is associated comes down to historical values, recognizable images, landscapes that facilitate communication, & to an intuitive feeling that local life is connected to the web of living things.
Contrasting expectations of rural areas.

- Commodification of rurality vs. authentic experience
- Rural areas valued for their aesthetic and utilitarian values
Commodification of rurality

- Rurality is itself now being commodified
  - Rural tourism, products and experiences
    - Sale of ‘rurality’ provides a ‘shadow experience’ – “stripped of its geographic content, the cultural expression becomes a shadow of the total experience. Although it can be enjoyed and appreciated by others, it can’t evoke the deep feeling of place.”
  - Consumers seeking an authentic rural experience get the inauthentic instead
    - Rural tourism as a development scheme marketed to a suburban/urban audience often at high cost to social & environmental fabric
    - Can turn rural areas into rustic Disneylands devoid of anything real with residents parodying their real self or fictional selves
Rural areas valued for their aesthetic & utilitarian uses

- Sub/urbanites still demand the commodities that rural areas produce which are often produced with harm to the land and its people
  - At the same time they demand that they be produced in an environmentally nondestructive/sustainable manner but they are unwilling to pay more for doing so.

- They don’t want the refuse of their consumption to be deposited in urban areas (NIMBY)
  - They depend on rural areas to take their unwanted, dangerous, noxious or offensive refuse – trash, prisons, missile sites, nuclear waste
Rural areas valued for their aesthetic & utilitarian uses

- Demand for wilderness preservation pits wilderness against people
  - Urban environmentalists vs. loggers, miners, & ranchers
  - Those who seek to preserve or protect vs. those who seek to earn a living

- Environmental amenities are luxury goods – things that people want more of as their incomes rise
  - Increasing urban wealth will translate into more conflict
What do we want our rural areas to be?

- If we want them to be sources of cheap commodities, then the people who provide those commodities will be low-wage labor.
- If we desire pristine wilderness, then people will not fit if at all.
- If receptacles for our refuse are what we seek, then trash heaps are what we will get.
What do we want our rural areas to be?

- What we want (and are willing to pay for) will go a long way in determining what we get.

- Will it be sub/urban dwellers calling the shots for places where they do not live or newly ensconced rural dwellers attempting to call the shots for places they now proudly, if somewhat hollowly, call home.
A new social contract? (Stauber, 2000)

- All public policy is based on the intersection of individual and societal interests
  - “The common thread through (rules for collective behavior) has been a reciprocal agreement specifying what individuals owe to the group and what the group owes in return.” (Slant & Barkley)
  - This shared interest is the basis of the social contract

- America has a long history of social contracts forming the basis of rural public policy
  - Frontier
  - Storehouse
  - Deregulation
  - What’s next?
Frontier social contract

- From the end of the American Revolution to the late 1800s, Americans agreed to provide targeted assistance to rural Americans based on the benefits they provided to society.

- Government sponsored exploration, military protection, government-sponsored displacement of indigenous peoples to the benefit of Euro-Americans, federally supported enterprises to compete with foreign ones along the border.
 Frontier social contract

- Rural people provided reciprocating economic, cultural, and spiritual benefits
  - Economic:
    - Food and feed needed to support the growing urban population;
    - Raw materials necessary to balance the nation’s early trade deficit
  - Cultural & spiritual:
    - The frontier tested American will. It was the place where Americans did God’s work bringing civilization to the savage, taming the wilderness.
    - US was thought to be different and superior to Europe. The frontier was where the rugged, individualistic superiority over ‘soft’ Europe was developed.
    - It was a source of hope to Americans. Opportunity lay ahead. Failure could be left behind
    - It was an outlet for the unskilled
Storehouse social contract

- With the industrial revolution, rural America became the place the provide commodities to feed the urban machine
  - Rural America went from defining America to supplying it
- The contract benefited both the urban majority & rural minority
  - The urban majority received affordable raw materials, surplus financial capital and motivated, English speaking workers
  - The rural minority benefited from public investments in institutions designed to increase the flow of raw materials and the efficiency of their production
    - Rail and water transportation subsidies
    - Opening of public lands to mining, logging
    - Construction of massive irrigation projects
    - Development of electric and telephone systems
    - Direct subsidy to farmers producing major crops
    - Underwriting of public research and extension programs to benefit farmers & ranchers
End of storehouse contract

- **Economies of scale (deregulation) policy:**
  - Carter’s call for a shift in policy that assured minimal public service to all to one that promoted lowest cost services to urban majority
    - End of subsidization of provision of services to rural areas; rural communities placed at a disadvantage
  - Americans came to conclusion that the social contract of the “Storehouse” was no longer worth the subsidy
    - Urbanites believed there was no compelling social or self-interested reason to subsidize rural enterprises and people

- **Rural minority held on some elements of past social contracts**
  - Farm subsidies, federally funded agricultural and forestry research, significant transportation subsidies on rivers
  - Largely as a result of structure of Congressional committees and political power & savvy of rural special interests, especially farmers and ranchers
New rules

- Since 1970s America became a suburban nation
  - 1990: 50% of Americans lived in metro areas larger than 1 million
  - 1991: majority of votes cast for president were from suburban districts
  - 1994: suburban representatives occupied all top five positions in the US House
  - 1996: 76 of 435 Congressional districts were rural
  - 2001: 2000 Census shows US to be a suburban nation with a majority living in suburbs with a majority of political power
  - “Any project that entails government acting in the broad national interest (rather than the narrower interests of the suburban middle class) probably won’t get done” (Lemann, 1998)
Why invest in rural America? (Stauber, 2002)

- To protect and restore the environment.
- To produce high-quality, de-commodified food and fiber
- As a laboratory of social innovation
- To produce health, well-educated future citizens
- To maintain population distribution and prevent urban crowding.
To protect and restore the environment

- Rural communities & people are subsidized to increase environmental quality.
  - The challenges of such an approach include
    - Whether it can provide adequate income to sustain rural communities
    - Our lack of experience incentivizing environmental restoration.
To produce high-quality, de-commodified food and fiber

- Growing evidence that a portion of Americans are willing to pay more for food & fiber that they see as safer and better for the environment
  - Instead of subsidizing farmers and loggers to produce cheap, average quality commodities, US should provide incentives to produce speciality, branded products
- Challenges of this approach include
  - It is anti-mass culture
  - Works best for communities in the urban periphery
  - Requires new distribution and marketing systems
As a laboratory of social innovation

- America faces many social problems that are awaiting new, innovative solutions
  - The small size and strong social bonds or rural areas are advantageous in creating new approaches

- Challenges with this approach include:
  - Rural resistance to change
  - Lack of financial resources focused on social & economic innovation
  - Class & race divisions
To produce healthy, well-educated future citizens

- A continuation of the storehouse contract
  - If significant amounts of rural people continue to migrate to urban areas, they should move as assets rather than liabilities

- Challenges of this approach:
  - Assumes child development is an export industry
  - Assumes it builds people, not rural places
To maintain population distribution & prevent urban crowding

- Urban areas are struggling with gridlock & sprawl
  - Any further migration of rural people to urban areas will only add to the existing congestion

- Challenges to this approach:
  - Many Americans benefit from increased growth
  - This is a locational strategy, not a development one
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