



Amenity migration for land stewardship: Getting to know the new faces in ranching

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On the Ground

- Amenity migration is a phenomenon entailing the temporary or permanent movement of urban dwellers to rural areas.
- Most of the literature on amenity migration to working lands has focused on farming communities or ranching communities with high scenic beauty.
- Our study focuses on amenity migration to ranching communities that are not traditionally considered scenic places; they attract a less affluent segment of amenity migrants and have expanded since the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Our study seeks to understand who these amenity migrants are by focusing on their motivations to purchase land, their goals within their ranches, and their levels of knowledge about managing rangelands.
- It is critical to understand this population, because they are becoming more prominent and are the main clientele of conservation staff. Their actions have important repercussions for the ecological and financial health of rangeland systems.

Keywords: Amenity migration, Ex-urban land-owners, Urban-to-rural migration.

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Introduction

The phenomenon of amenity migration, which is the seasonal or permanent movement of urban dwellers to rural areas, attracted by their natural amenities,^{1–3} was first described in the United States in the 1970s^{3–5} and is now a worldwide occurrence.^{6,7} Within the context of amenity migration to working lands, past literature has focused on ranching communities with high scenic beauty (e.g., Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem)^{8,9} or farming communities. More recently, this phenomenon has been taking place in ranching communities that are not traditionally considered scenic,¹⁰ offering less expensive land that, in turn, attracts relatively less affluent amenity migrants. Recent evidence suggests that this phenomenon became more prominent because of the COVID-19 pandemic.^{11,12}

There is much we do not know about this population of amenity migrants who are moving to such communities, named in recent literature as *land steward amenity migrants* (C. Veintimilla et al., unpublished data, 2024). Based on previous work, we know this phenomenon is more than a movement of people.¹³ Significant economic, social, and biophysical implications have been reported following the arrival of amenity migrants to receiving communities.^{3,14,15}

Our study focus is on better understanding who these steward amenity migrants are and how they manage their operations. Their management decisions have implications on the ecological and financial health of rural working lands. For instance, the lack of grazing by livestock and/or wildlife has detrimental impacts on grassland heterogeneity and diversity, which reduces wildlife diversity.¹⁶ Similarly, the removal of fire from rangelands leads to extensive woody-plant encroachment, diminished forage production, and reduced plant diversity on rangelands—all of which jeopardize the provision of ecosystem services inherent in grassland systems.¹⁷

Thus, understanding these land steward amenity migrants and their attitudes and behaviors in relation to ranching and conservation practices within rangelands is key. We have limited knowledge about this growing population that is becom-

ing a critical player in the conservation and financial future of rangeland operations. Given our limited knowledge, we specifically sought to increase our understanding of their motivations and expectations regarding their ranches and their ranching knowledge and experience. To do so, we talked to 64 land steward amenity migrants distributed among five different focus groups in five regions across Texas in the spring of 2024.

Literature review

Amenity migration is the movement of individuals, typically from urban areas to rural regions, in search of a better quality of life and access to natural environments.^{18–20} This phenomenon has often occurred in areas with high scenic value, such as mountains, lakes, and coastal regions, where migrants seek picturesque landscapes.¹ Often, such places are located in regions highly dependent on recreation and tourism. To a lesser extent, studies have been conducted in communities dependent on working lands with forests, farms, and ranches,²¹ creating new dynamics in land management and conservation.

Abrams and Bliss²¹ describe these spaces as “working landscapes,” referring to rural areas owned and worked by amenity migrants. There is literature concerning amenity migrants in working landscapes, especially in farming,^{22–28} but less is known about those moving to ranching communities.^{1,29–31} This is particularly the case for ranching communities not traditionally considered scenic, which most likely offer relatively less expensive land and attract a less affluent segment of amenity migrants.

This is different from previous literature, where amenity migrants are characterized as affluent, middle- to upper-class individuals seeking a lifestyle that blends rurality with aspects of conservation, leisure, and selective production.^{32,33} The sociodemographic profile of land steward amenity migrants has been characterized by several key characteristics.^{19,22,26,28,30,31,34} They tend to be older adults, often >45 years old,³⁵ who have already built careers in urban centers and seek to engage in a holistic, environmentally conscious lifestyle.³⁶ Abrams and Bliss²¹ note that these migrants are often retired professionals, remote workers, and wealthy entrepreneurs, with many holding college degrees or postgraduate qualifications and having backgrounds in professional sectors, such as finance, healthcare, or technology.²⁸ They are predominantly male, though there is recent evidence of gender diversity as more couples and families engage in this type of amenity migration.^{35,10} Often, they are financially independent individuals who have either accumulated sufficient wealth to support themselves without needing to rely on income from their land or have portable location-independent jobs enabling them to live in remote areas.³⁸ Their financial independence allows them to make land-use decisions based on personal values rather than on economic imperatives, which is a departure from traditional ranchers, whose livelihoods depend on the productivity of their land.^{31,39} Further,

they view their new rural homes through an esthetic or environmental lens, which affects their decisions regarding land use, wildlife conservation, and ecological restoration.⁴⁰

Land steward amenity migrants’ motivations to ranch differ significantly from those of traditional ranchers, who are often tied to the land through family heritage or productivist practices.⁴¹ For land steward amenity migrants, the primary motivation tends to be lifestyle enhancement rather than economic gain. Haggerty and Travis⁴² describe these migrants as seeking a combination of recreation, leisure, and personal fulfillment through land ownership, who view the land as a space for connection with nature and conservation. Amenity migrants often cite the appeal of peace and quiet, clean air, and open spaces as reasons for their relocation.⁴³ The rural landscape offers them a perceived refuge from modernity, where they can reconnect with nature and live an authentic, slower-paced life.²⁰ However, unlike traditional ranchers who depend on land productivity, these migrants view rural life through an appreciative lens, because they see the land as something to be enjoyed rather than exploited for economic purposes.³⁶

The values and perceptions of amenity migrants toward nature differ from those of traditional landowners. Both value nature, but amenity migrants subscribe to an environmental ethos prioritizing conservation, biodiversity, and ecological stewardship⁴³ and often implement practices aimed at restoring native vegetation, protecting wildlife, or reducing the ecological footprint of their land use.⁴⁴ This approach, according to Abrams and Bliss,²¹ contrasts with the production-oriented mindset of traditional ranching operations, where management decisions are based on profitability; most household income is derived directly from their land. These distinct environmental values of amenity migrants can create tensions with long-standing rural residents, who may view the newcomers’ land-use practices as inefficient or even detrimental to the traditional rural economy.^{21,42} For instance, amenity migrants might prioritize wildlife conservation over grazing productivity, or they may oppose traditional practices such as prescribed burning or hunting.⁴³ These divergent values often result in cultural clashes between newcomers and traditional ranchers, as the former are, intentionally or not, reshaping rural landscapes based on their environmental ideals.³² Despite these tensions, some studies suggest amenity migrants have the potential to introduce positive changes to rural land-management practices.³⁷ By investing in conservation-oriented initiatives, such as reforestation or habitat restoration, these migrants could contribute to the long-term sustainability of rural landscapes.⁴³ However, the success of such initiatives often depends on collaborative relationships between newcomers and traditional ranchers, as well as the willingness of both parties to adopt adaptive land-management practices.²⁵

The interaction between land-steward amenity migrants and traditional ranching communities is complex and multifaceted. As Haggerty and Travis⁴² note, the arrival of new landowners in rural areas can disrupt existing social and economic structures, particularly when the newcomers have different land-use priorities or cultural values. Amenity migrants

can be seen as outsiders who are not fully integrated into the local community, leading to social tensions and conflicts over land-management decisions.^{1,45} Nonetheless, there are examples of positive interactions. Some amenity migrants have developed collaborative relationships with local ranchers, and they are working together on projects related to conservation, weed management, or sustainable grazing.³⁹ In these cases, the presence of amenity migrants can lead to innovations in land-management practices and the creation of hybrid landscapes that combine elements of traditional ranching with ecological stewardship.^{27,46}

Despite the growing body of research on amenity migration, most studies conducted in productive rural areas focus on farmers or non-ranching landowners (C. Veintimilla et al., unpublished data, 2024). The literature explores agricultural amenity migrants who purchase small acreage properties for lifestyle reasons rather than large ranches for environmental stewardship. There is a gap in understanding the specific dynamics of those moving to ranching communities, where land use often combines elements of traditional ranching with new ecological and recreational values.²⁷ This interaction between traditional ranchers and new amenity landowners could have implications for land management practices, conservation efforts, and rural economies.¹ Amenity landowners bring new priorities, such as wildlife preservation or esthetic values, which can lead to changes in land management and could conflict with local ranching traditions.^{42,43} Our study sought to understand how these land steward amenity migrants interact with and transform ranching and rural communities.

Methods

Study sites and population

Our study took place within the five United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) administrative zones in Texas. Each zone provides regional oversight for county-based offices and coordinates regional professional development and training for NRCS staff out of their zone offices in Lubbock, Corpus Christi, San Angelo, Bryan, and Weatherford. In each zone, a two-day, dual-purpose, free workshop was held, with the overall theme of ex-urban landowners.

On the first day of the workshop, NRCS and other conservation staff (County Extension Agents and wildlife biologists, among others) participated in a training about land steward amenity migrants. According to NRCS staff, during conversations previously and during our project, these amenity migrants have become their main clientele and are different from their traditional landowner clientele. This training focused on summarizing knowledge about amenity migration, how they relate to nature, and how to build collaborative relationships between conservation staff and amenity migrants.

On the second day of the workshop, land steward amenity migrants were invited to participate in learning about land stewardship principles. Participants learned about determining their land stewardship goals, understanding the role of

climate-smart practices, and connecting with agencies and resources that can assist with land management. Additionally, amenity migrants attended a focus group where we asked questions related to our study.

We recruited land steward amenity migrants through various methods, including print media, county extension offices, newsletters, and social media. Print media advertisement relied primarily on *Livestock Weekly* in February and March 2024, reaching a total paid circulation of around 11,000 weekly with ads. We also promoted the workshops locally with flyers at feedstores, coffee shops, post offices, grocery stores, and local county government offices.

Social media recruitment focused on Facebook and Instagram. We shared and promoted each workshop weekly from February to April through the following pages: West Texas Rangelands (4400 followers), Texas Cattlewomen (7800 followers), Texas A&M Center for Grazinglands and Ranch Management (1000 followers), Beef Cattle Texas A&M AgriLife Extension (7900 followers), and RanchTV Texas A&M AgriLife Extension (5500 followers). We reached 71,225 individuals and generated 29,432 engagements during this time.

Promoted social media events catered to distinct demographics through promotional campaigns targeting individuals who used to reside full-time in urban areas and are now seasonally or permanently living in rural areas, landowners with ranches purchased within the past 10 years, ownership of <40.5 hectares (100 acres), and users within ≤ 161 km (100 miles) radius of cities (Dallas-Fort Worth, Lubbock, San Angelo, Corpus Christi, and College Station). Social media users with profiles showing interest in certain activities, such as hunting, agriculture, farming, ranching, and similar pursuits, were also targeted. Blogs through West Texas Rangelands (1885 subscribers) were advertised weekly for every workshop and training, and 27,600 total campaigns were sent (between February and April) at an average open rate of 40.2% for each campaign.

Landowners attended the workshops, so we confirmed their amenity migration status before starting the focus groups. Participants were asked if they had resided in urban areas before moving seasonally or permanently to the ranches they owned. Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols, participants were provided with verbal consent forms explaining their rights and responsibilities if they decided to participate in our study. With few exceptions, all workshop participants agreed to participate in our focus groups.

Data collection

Our data were collected from five focus groups conducted between February 16 and April 27, 2024. Focus group discussions lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours. These conversations were recorded, and notes were taken by an assisting graduate student and later transcribed.

In each focus group, the same questions were asked by the principal investigator (PI). Questions included participants' motivations to purchase land in a rural community, ex-

Table 1

Information on workshop dates, locations, and total number of landowner attendance

Dates	City	Focus Group's Participants
2/16/24–2/17/24	Lubbock, TX	12
3/8/24–3/9/24	Corpus Christi, TX	10
4/12/24–4/13/24	San Angelo, TX	11
4/22/24–4/23/24	Bryan, TX	11
4/26/24–4/27/24	Stephenville, TX	20

pected goals/plans for their properties, previous experience and knowledge of managing ranches, obstacles faced when managing their ranches, forms in which they access information to manage their ranches, and topics for future workshops/help needed. Here, we focus on the first three questions about motivations, goals, and land-management experience.

Data analysis

After the interviews concluded, audio recordings were uploaded into AI software (otter.ai) for transcription into downloadable text documents. These documents were grouped by focus group, with each group's interview being filed into an individual transcription.

Data from the interviews were analyzed through a content analysis approach.⁴⁷ This approach guided the analysis and interpretation of data based on each of the research questions. Even though each question focused on a specific issue, we analyzed the entire set of questions to seek responses matching each of the three main questions addressed here. That is, we examined the full text to capture the meaning respondents were trying to convey for each of the issues studied.

When analyzing a question, responses were marked to note common responses from individual focus group members and groups as a whole. Common responses across groups were compiled to form overarching themes from each question, which were supported by direct quotes and more narrow categories that fit into a broader response. Although each question was analyzed individually in chronological order, if similar topics were brought up in answering other questions, those responses were noted and used to form themes for the appropriate question. Thus, if a topic was discussed in question 2 that was initially measured in question 1, that topic contributed to the themes formatted from question 1.

Once all questions were thoroughly analyzed and themes were identified, less common but notable responses were utilized as subcategories that helped to formulate the overarching and established theme. For example, if participants discussed their need for assistance regarding weed control, soil health, and invasive plant species, these specific responses were grouped to address the overarching theme that vegetation management was an area with which participants need assistance.

To ensure trustworthiness,⁴⁸ credibility was achieved through participant validation (e.g., member check). Con-

firmability was achieved through peer debriefing after each focus group and having two different research team members review the data-analysis process and interpretations. Transferability was achieved through the detailed description of study methods, sites, and participants. Dependability was achieved by using similar participants (e.g., land steward amenity migrants) in each focus group.

Results

We summarized our results by questions asked during the focus groups. Questions were designed from the onset to inquire about major gaps in our knowledge. Before the results from these questions, however, we offer a brief description of the study's participants.

In total, 64 respondents participated across five focus groups (Table 1). The demographic distribution of our 64 focus-group participants included a gender split of 46% female and 54% male. Age distribution was diverse: 7% were 18–25 years old, 21% were 26–40 years old, 49% were 41–60 years old, and 23% were >60 years old. Participants reported educational achievement: 37% held undergraduate degrees, 28% completed postgraduate studies, 25% had incomplete university educations, 5% completed high school, and 5% had not completed secondary education.

Participants' land holdings varied from a median of 23.6 hectares (58.5 acres) and a mean of 173.2 hectares (428 acres), with a range of 0.4 hectares (1 acre) to 1012 hectares (2500 acres). Their land-use preferences were multifaceted: 43% expressed interest in wildlife and conservation, 35% in livestock production, 19% in other smaller-scale farming and production ventures, and 3% prioritized recreation.

In terms of residency, 51% of participants resided on their ranches, while 49% were nonresident landowners who commuted to their properties. The mean distance between their residences and ranches was 72.4 km (45 miles), with the closest living within 16 km (10 miles) and the farthest residing at 386 km (240 miles).

None of the participants relied solely on ranch production for their economic sustenance; 66% indicated that they were earning income as salaried employees unrelated to ranching, 17% received retirement income, 12% derived income from a combination of ranching and other sources, and 5% generated income from non-ranch-related businesses.

Motivations for migrating to rural areas

Participants were asked to identify their motivation for seasonally or permanently migrating to rural areas. A portion of the motivations for establishing a new life in a rural setting focused on the desire to escape the malaises of city life. These "push factors" included lack of safety, high costs of living, high taxes, traffic congestion, and loss of moral values. One participant, referring to urban problems said, "In the city, there is a trend where everybody's 'fend for yourself' now, and you don't

see a lot of that responsibility anymore.” Adding to this, a respondent noted:

The values are not the same. It's degraded immensely. I think there's kind of a general lack of accountability and responsibility amongst individuals, especially with youth. I don't think people these days are accountable for their actions. They don't take responsibility for things. People don't have [any] regard for how that affects their neighbors at all.

Another motivation expressed in all the focus groups was the desire to obtain more independence and control over their lives in comparison to their urban communities. This meant participants hoped to have more control over their daily activities in many dimensions, including work, personal safety, and access to healthful food. This view is reflected in statements such as, “I don't want somebody else telling me [what] my job is,” and “I want to do my own thing,” and “You have so much more control over what happens in your little piece of the world.” Respondents mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic played an important role in their motivation, because it revealed to them how little control they had over their economy and food supply. One respondent shared:

When COVID hit, it was a huge shocker to me to not be able to get the products we needed...our whole world had been turned upside down...that was a huge thing to me to see that we were very reliant on the economy the way it is. And that even subtle ripples can be astronomical to communities.

The issue of having more control over their personal safety was also mentioned. A respondent indicated: “Whenever I'm out of town [i.e., the city] and I'm just on our few acres...I leave the door open... subconsciously in my mind or something just feels safer out there.” Thus, respondents expressed gaining a sense of control over their decisions and daily activities as a reason why they decided to move to a rural area.

Beyond the “push” factor of city life, the literature also notes the “pull” factors that attracted them to rural areas. The first and most mentioned pull motivation across all focus groups for purchasing rural land was centered around children. A respondent noted the reasons behind their rationale for this:

You realize the experience you had as a child, and you want that for your children. So that's what takes you back. So that's what put me on the search, and maybe you could have the best of both worlds.

There were several dimensions to the children-driven motivation, with the most common being the desire to provide the youth and children in their families the ability to experience rural life. Many expressed that they wanted their children to have experiences like they'd had in their own childhoods. Respondents noted, “You realize the experiences you had as a child, and you want that for your children,” and “I just want my grandkids to know the things that I grew up with, and that's why we're kind of getting out of the urban mess.” This sentiment emerged from childhood memories, even for

those growing up in urban areas, with respondents' indicating that times and cities are very different compared to years past.

Another dimension of their motivations included the idea of instilling different values in contrast to those perceived as being imposed upon their children and grandchildren in the city. According to respondents, these included positive values, such as respect, responsibility, self-sufficiency, the perspective that being part of something bigger gives, and caring for the land. Participants believed that life on their ranches and away from the city provided a higher level of control over the values and experiences of their children. Participants indicated a complete disagreement with contemporary values and their disapproval of what their children were being taught in the city and in their schools. They did not specify what these values were and treaded carefully when discussing this point. However, they were very clear about the land as a remedy to that problem. A participant added, “There's a lot to be said about what you teach your child or children with those responsibilities that you choose, not imposed.” Along these lines, others noted that “the main reason [for owning land] is that we have this place where our family can live happily and do the things under the values that we want” and “I don't want anybody else to have to raise my kids. I want to be able to raise my own kids.”

While part of their motivation is associated with removing their children from what respondents consider sources of undesired values, another part had to do with what respondents believed to be a positive value system provided by managing land. Respondents believed these positive values were associated with ranching and rural life, particularly through the experiences and challenges from having to learn to ranch. They believed such experiences and challenges exposed children to situations very different from what they were currently experiencing in urban areas. A participant, detailing this idea expressed, “There's a lot of maturity and responsibility that comes with doing things for yourself, learning new things, whatever it may be.”

Because of this, respondents were motivated by the ability to connect their children to the land and give them a different perspective on life. For instance, some respondents noted how their children gained an appreciation of where their food comes from, saying, “I want my grandkids to have that connection.” Other respondents expressed how having a ranch is an educational tool, where their children can “be in 4H (a youth development program in agriculture) and FFA (Future Farmers of America) and experience livestock” and steward the land for future generations in and outside of the family.

Finally, regarding the motivation associated with youth and children, respondents commonly expressed motivations for future generations to inherit a legacy through their land, saying “that's for our family, for our future. To build a legacy.” Overall, respondents expressed the motivation for their land purchase to influence their children's upbringing while separating them from what they considered many urban malaises and providing the necessary elements to create a positive influence on their children.

A second pull factor to purchase a ranch included their desire to return to nature. Many participants expressed that they had lived in proximity to nature during their childhoods and noted how, growing up, they were “interested in agriculture or things of that nature,” or how experiences in outdoor spaces drove a desire to return to natural environments. From their answers, nature could be defined in ecological as well as ranching terms. Many expressed the desire to return to and be a part of the “peaceful and beautiful” outdoors they grew up in where nature helps them to rejuvenate. Other respondents equated their access to nature with being “involved in the agriculture industry, as far as creating our own protein source [and] growing our own food.” Others expressed wanting to make money off the land, and owning livestock, such as goats, horses, cattle, and/or chickens (i.e., as ranch animals and in some instances, as pets), as a way for them to return to nature. In summary, the motivations for amenity migrants’ moving to ranching communities include push factors associated with the desire to remove themselves and their children from the city and the problems associated with it. The pull factors centered on the belief that living on the ranches would provide positive values, perspectives, and experiences for themselves and their children.

Expectations/uses/goals regarding their rangeland operations

Participants were asked to discuss their goals and expectations for their land/ranch. A common goal for their land purchase was for their family to routinely work and live together on a “family compound.” They expressed a desire for their properties to be venues that would bring connection to the family through the engagement of various practices associated with its management. Commenting on this, a participant stated, “I’m looking forward to working with my husband on a regular basis,” and “I hope our children would want to maintain such a lifestyle.”

Furthermore, respondents often communicated a desire to pass on their property’s ownership to younger generations. One motivation was due to the economic value they placed on the land. On this topic, a respondent noted, “I know that land is valuable, because land and time are two things you can never get more of. Those are two key things that...you can never reproduce. So, I know there’s value in the land.”

Another motivation was their desire to cede their land to their progeny, associated with the moral values they believed managing land would teach their children. Similar to their motivations for moving, respondents expected to have control over their lives, remove their children from the negative values their children were being exposed to in the city, and replace them with positive values resulting from engaging in managing their properties. For instance, respondents talked about their kids’ being able to “raise their own [food] and to grow things and to maybe build a future for themselves.”

A less prominent but still common response was the expectation to adopt a new and enjoyable lifestyle. Participants said being on the land “keeps [them] busy and out of trouble,”

and “the driving force behind it is to keep me from sitting around all day long and not having anything to do at a house inside the city limits.” Others expressed that their “main goal” is “freedom more than anything, [and the] quality of life is better out there,” and “to be able to see if I can make a legacy for myself here.” Respondents described many scenarios supporting this theme, one saying, “I guess what, as I mentioned, motivates me is I want to be able to have a small house, maybe just a couple of acres for some animals. And, you know... just to kind of establish a life for me.”

For answers associated with land management, several dimensions of responses emerged. Some focused on being as self-sustaining as possible, where respondents defined self-sufficiency in terms of food, values, and even what to do with their days. Participants planned to produce their own food, live according to their own values, and manage the land in their own way. Other prominent responses focused on practicing effective stewardship. Respondents expected to oversee their land’s management, saying they wish to “leave it better than what it was. To have my hand in creating something that’s better.” Building upon the desire to pass the land to their children, respondents hoped that their land would be worth wanting to keep. One respondent said, “I really have discovered maybe in the last three or four years, just this wonderful desire to take care of the land. I want to make it beautiful, healthy, and I want to take care of the land,” and another said, “For me, right now, probably for the next foreseeable five years, it’s going to be a program of reclamation.” Participants said things such as, “I want to study [and produce] something that you’re proud of,” and “I want to learn how to better utilize...and be a better steward of the land.”

Other common expectations focused on ranching with livestock, such as cattle, sheep, goats, horses, or wildlife management for hunting. Respondents said things such as, “I’d love to be able to sit in the house... see a whole mile out...and see the cows grazing out in the pasture,” and “I guess providing for myself right now kind of thing and like, it’s awesome. It’s just what makes me happy. It’s what I grew up with...and, like, that’s just where I feel most at home.”

Some respondents expected to use their property to teach land management and stewardship to others. From food production to general land stewardship, participants expressed their desire to share their experiences with educational groups, friends, and family members who visit. One participant hoped to “use it for students to come out from the various colleges in the areas...[and] host some of these kinds of events so that people can come to see it, and work, and see the impact it has on [the] land and family.” The expected benefits were expressed across groups, with respondents saying experiences related to the land are “invaluable...you can’t put a price on it, to share it,” and sharing these experiences is “helpful for the family, kids and whoever might visit to kind of get an understanding [of the] education experience.” One respondent said, “It starts opening the eyes and sharing with others the joy of living on [land, to] serve a conservation purpose.” Another respondent, however,

noted the tradeoffs that are needed for these expectations to take place:

I don't think being regenerative farmers [or] ranchers, [or] looking after the health of the land is necessarily compatible with having our profitable income streams and providing opportunities for our children and other family members.

Related to this, another expectation concerning their land that was mentioned in each focus group was generating income. Most respondents did not plan for their land to be their sole source of income. Generating money from the ranch was desirable, but respondents were clear that their financial security was not dependent on the ranch. One participant said, "If we could make money, it would be nice, but we don't depend on the land for survival." Respondents expressed many different ideas for generating income, from production-based activities, such as raising cattle or other livestock, growing crops or establishing a vineyard/beer garden, or using the real estate value of their land through agritourism and land-rental opportunities. Obtaining their agricultural-use valuation was another topic discussed by participants to decrease the long-term property tax burden of the land. In summary, the goals associated with land purchase were varied, yet most were linked to the noneconomic benefits that working the land would bring them.

Previous experience and knowledge of ranching

Participants were asked about their previous land-management experience and knowledge before purchasing their property. Most participants expressed that they had little to no experience or knowledge, yet admitted they initially believed they knew a lot. A participant commenting on this said, "My perception has changed greatly." Others said, "I didn't know ranching had so much to do with plumbing," and "This is one of the first actual land management education that I would say I've received so far" [referring to the workshop we provided to them]. Throughout the focus groups, participants expressed being taken aback by the amount of knowledge required to ranch. Many admitted not knowing how some foundational practices, such as fire or grazing management, were instrumental to rangelands. Others acknowledged their lack of understanding of the financial burdens of ranching, admitting they were already over budget and not knowing how they would be able to implement the stewardship practices they had been learning. In general, the predominant feeling among participants was that of being "overwhelmed." As this word was expressed, most participants in the room nodded their heads in complete agreement.

Despite these gaps, respondents expressed that they came in wanting and willing to learn. They said things such as, "I'm not afraid, and I don't know everything, but [I'm a] quick learner, and we have lots of resources," and "In my mind, I thought my plan was right. Adding to this, a respondent noted:

We've been learning [proper] education through the available resources [and] listening to some old-timers. Not always is that the best resource, but you implement what you can and what makes sense... Because there are people who have been doing this a lot longer than I have, and they usually have some good input. Yeah, I may not take all of it, but I can.

Particularly notable was their positive disposition to learn. This is consistent with what many extension and conservation staff have experienced. So, although respondents admitted to feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of ranching, they expressed a strong desire to learn and to manage their land in the best way possible.

A smaller group of participants shared that they felt as if they knew enough from their childhood or past experiences to understand what they needed or wanted, but not enough to achieve it. One participant said, "I know what I think I want, but to get from here to there, I need help," and another said, "So I knew about stocking rates-ish, animal units-ish, and never put it into practice." Even fewer respondents had experience working with livestock or the land and, therefore, they felt they had a better understanding than most participants of managing their land. Experiences such as building fences, handling machinery, working with certain livestock and using available resources, such as family and various trainings, helped these participants to feel more confident in their abilities to manage their land. One participant said, "I worked for the federal government for 10 years as a park ranger on some lakes down in Central Texas, and my job there was to manage the land... So I kind of came into it knowing what I'm going to have to do to make it work."

In summary, the overall answer to this question by most focus-group participants was that they lacked the knowledge and experience to manage their land. Regardless of their knowledge gaps, however, they were eager to learn and full of hope, looking into the future and feeling completely committed to their dream.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our study provides an understanding of the motivations, goals, and foundation of land steward amenity migrants' transition from urban centers to rural ranching communities. Similar to the counter-urbanization literature,^{49,50} the findings shed light on what it means to get away from the city to start a new life. More specifically, within the context studied, the findings note the relevance that ranching has on amenity migrants' lives.

To better understand the study's contributions, it is key to note the particular circumstances uncovered, which are different from those reported in the past. First, our study found that land steward amenity migrants are not always the typically reported affluent individuals.^{32,35} While having the economic means to secure land, the conversations we had with the land steward migrants shed light on their financial circumstances, which were reflected in several dimensions of their lives. For

instance, the rural real estate market that has attracted the studied ranching amenity migrants is not traditionally considered scenic and is most likely much more affordable than more scenic ranching locations in other parts of the country. Second, our findings show that amenity migrants are more diverse than the commonly reported demography of males older than 45 years of age.³⁵ Our study participants were more diverse, including a larger range of ages and many females and multigenerational families.^{17,21}

Furthermore, our study contributes to understanding the specific pull factors that motivate land steward amenity migrants to relocate to rural areas and engage in ranching. Respondents described how they perceive rural life and ranching as opportunities to cultivate desirable values and skills, which they believe will benefit themselves, their children, and their grandchildren over the long term. Existing social science literature about rangelands has examined primarily how values influence the acceptance or rejection of rangeland management practices,¹⁰ but our study highlights a distinct role for values within such a context. For participants, values were so important to their migration decision that they were undeterred by their lack of knowledge and experience in ranching. This focus on values reflected their desire to counteract perceived negative influences of urban life and promote positive values they expect will develop from engaging in ranching. Altogether, respondents believed these values would foster personal growth and development for themselves and future generations.

Another key finding of our study was the central role that family played in the decision to relocate and purchase a ranch. Across all focus groups, participants consistently emphasized the importance of family cohesion, transformation, and the desire to establish a legacy through their land and its management. The specific dynamics and themes emerging from these discussions appear to be underrepresented in the existing literature.

Finally, our study found differences in terms of the aptitude that land steward amenity migrants have for managing their ranches compared to previous studies. The literature shows that some of these land steward amenity migrants might prioritize wildlife conservation over grazing productivity, or they may oppose traditional practices such as controlled burns or hunting.³⁴ However, we found that participants were unaware that these and other key practices were critical to ranching, which supports their self-reported lack of rangeland experience and knowledge.

These observations hold significant implications for conservation professionals who engage with amenity steward landowners. Effective rangeland management requires a deep understanding of ecological processes to preserve the function and integrity of native plant communities. Therefore, it is crucial to connect the value of these practices to this emerging and expanding group of landowners. Typically, this connection is made by emphasizing the ecological and economic benefits of ranching, which often serve as the primary approach in interactions with landowners. However, from a social sciences perspective, it is vital to acknowledge that the goals, expectations, and motivations guiding land-

management decisions are shaped by a set of values and sentiments that influence behaviors, and these may not always align with traditional practice-based approaches.⁵¹ In our study, we found that though conservation is an important concern for these amenity migrants, their decisions to purchase land and engage in ranching were driven primarily by family considerations and the desire to promote positive values. Recognizing these underlying values and understanding their significance can foster trust with landowners and provide a foundation for introducing rangeland management practices in a way that aligns with their personal and family goals. As noted by Matarrita-Cascante et al.,¹⁰ trust is a critical factor in mediating the relationship between policymakers, extension agents, and landowners. Once trust is established, other objectives, including ecological goals, are likely to be embraced and implemented.

Study limitations

We must acknowledge several limitations of our study, particularly regarding the methodological choices. First, using focus groups inherently limits the sample size, potentially limiting the diversity of perspectives captured. Although focus groups are valuable for gaining rich, qualitative insights, the small number of participants in relation to the larger population may have reduced the ability to claim that these attitudes, ideas, and perspectives are held by the broader land steward amenity migrant population. This is particularly the case when accounting for the fact that our study's population included those who had learned about and chosen to attend the workshops. Further, despite our efforts, some of the larger focus groups (i.e., Stephenville) saw certain voices and viewpoints overemphasized, which potentially neglected others, which may have been underrepresented within the group.

Furthermore, the choice of using the USDA-NRCS geographic zones as study areas may not have captured fully the diversity of the population. Regional factors, such as socioeconomic status, access to resources, and cultural practices, vary significantly, and a singular geographic lens could oversimplify these variations. The potential for regional biases means that the findings may not fully represent the lived experiences and attitudes of individuals from other areas. Future studies may benefit from employing larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal approaches to better understand the complex factors shaping the phenomena and spectrum driving land steward amenity migration.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests. The authors certify that they have no financial interest in the subject matter discussed in the manuscript.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

David Matarrita-Cascante: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Cinthy Veintimilla:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Investigation. **Chase Brooke:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Investigation. **Morgan Treadwell:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition. **Caitlin Castro:** Writing – original draft, Formal analysis.

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