

Research for sustainable communities

Anthony Patt

Abstract

In recent years, scientists have increasingly focused on the role of ecosystem services in enhancing the sustainability and value of mountain areas. In this talk, I describe research into social systems that has the same objective. I focus on strands of research examining related, but nevertheless distinct, questions.

First, how can we best manage natural resources in mountainous areas: what institutions, organizations, and strategies work better than others? The main goals for such management are the typical enhancement of value of resources, such as timber and farmland, on the one hand, and the protection of communities against risks, primarily from landslides and rockfalls, avalanches, and flash floods, on the other. Social science research has examined the preconditions for effective long-term management, achieving these goals in the face of short-term pressures to use resources unsustainably, and I summarize some interesting conclusions. With respect to risk management, I draw off of two recent studies of landslide management, one examining a single community in Austria, and a second contrasting governance approaches in mountain regions of India and Italy. Together, these studies provide important evidence concerning the respective roles of public and private institutions, and concerning the geographical level at which decisions are taken.

Second, how can we make communities in mountain areas attractive places to live? In the Alps, the track record would appear to be poor, as the region has experienced a continuous and dramatic outmigration of people, in particular younger people with valuable skills. First, I examine the evidence of whether the out-migration is a result of alpine communities become less attractive places to live, or a result of increased opportunity elsewhere. Second, and more importantly, I examine the evidence concerning the factors driving out-migration, and the types of opportunities -- economic and social -- that can be created in mountain communities, necessary and sufficient to make them attractive places to live.

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