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Book Review: Key Role of Communities for Environmental Sustainability in Rural Canada

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Key Role of Communities for Environmental Sustainability in Rural Canada

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Lars K. Hallstrom, Mary A. Beckie, Glen T. Hvenegaard, and Karsten Mundel (Eds.). *Sustainability Planning and Collaboration in Rural Canada: Taking the Next Steps*. Edmonton, Alberta: University of Alberta Press. 2016. 408 pages. ISBN: 978-1-772120400

Halstrom, Beckie, Hvenegaard, and Mundel have compiled a collection of studies centered on regional environmental issues in rural Canada. According to Halstrom, rural communities in Canada have a “key role to play in terms of environmental sustainability” (p. xi). The editors divide the compilation thematically: sustainability as critical to public policy; engagement and collaboration between citizens, municipalities, and higher education researchers; and recommendations on the environmental policy process. The rural communities highlighted in the research reflect a cross-section of Canadian culture and a broad scope of geographic regions.

Religious practices and the cultural lens of rural life factors into sustainability planning and process. However, these also serve as challenges to implementing sustainable methods by local governments and small city planners. In Chapter 1, Douglas calls for power structures based in rural values in a “decentralized network of rural regions with strong constituent community governments” (p. 11). Location of the rural community in Canada mitigates the conflict of cooperation on natural resource management. All of the articles ground their studies within the lens of place and analyze allocations of space. University researchers assist to collect data, analyze community engagement, and encourage shared governance structures. In some cases, university researchers act as mediators employing commonalities to bring disparate groups together (Alexander and Jones).

Some chapters include detailed maps to guide the reader in comprehending the space and place concerns; however, others rely only on narratives and descriptive location terms. If one is unfamiliar with Canadian geography, one may lose sight of the full meaning of the impact of the environmental actions taken by the various people groups in their locale. Community mapping is crucial to explaining sustainable development in relationship

to the needs of the rural communities. According to Corbett, Hamilton, and Wright, “community maps represent a socially or culturally distinct understanding of landscape” and aid in building “community cohesion” (p. 273). This theme of building up rural community life and providing guidance for sustainability pervades the narratives throughout this book.

Many case studies, such as Chapter 5 by Chauvin, Chapter 10 placed in Northwest Ontario, and Chapter 3 in Alberta, are grounded theoretically and pragmatically in public engagement. The engagement of the public in regard to wildlife management as a sustainable practice is examined. Do rural Canadians share resources with wildlife or have an androcentric view? Alberta, for example, created a Purple Martin Landlord Program to promote social learning and citizen science. The town of Craik developed an ecovillage. Pelee Island houses myriad insects, amphibians, birds, and mammals. The local government called for balancing human interest and wildlife preservation. This ecosystem approach ties economic growth to sustainability.

Rural communities represented in this book realized the positive economic impacts of ecotourism. First Nation communities, such as Red Rock Indian Band, were not quick to embrace ecotourism. More education on the benefits is needed to fully persuade residents to buy-in, and train for jobs to sustain an ecotourism industry in these Canadian rural communities. Demographic shifts of out migration are also causing problems for building a sustainable rural Canada. The young labor force needs to be convinced there is a life for them within the rural communities. As these laborers migrate to the cities, retirees are left behind, draining economic resources. This, in turn, creates a different kind of sustainability problem, one not based on environmental issues, but merely on the economic survival of the community as low

population density leads to a critical mass for demand of services and infrastructure. However, by focusing on environmental sustainability, wildlife preservation, ecotourism, and citizen science, rural communities can experience a growing economy that will attract a more educated workforce to return.

This book shows how rural communities can achieve their goals of sustainability and create communities that are vital and vibrant when higher education researchers, local government officials, industry partners, service organizations, and community members band together.

Irvine, Keenan, and Vodden (p. 131) recommend these steps to taking rural communities from where they are to where they need to be:

1. Identify the issues impacting the community
2. Map the locations of impact
3. Examine affected infrastructure
4. Discover citizens who will need help and citizens who can help
5. Evaluate economic factors
6. Explore impacts on natural environment
7. Assess ways to address concerns

In doing so, rural communities develop an action plan to reach sustainability, engage all stakeholders, and move forward as a thriving community. By compiling these narratives, case studies, and research articles, the editors provide an action plan for rural communities everywhere, not just in Canada. This book is well-suited for anyone who wishes to learn how to create a more sustainable community that maintains economic viability, grows an educated and engaged workforce and volunteer network, and promotes citizen science and wildlife preservation.

Acknowledgment

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About the Reviewer

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