

# **Mountainous regions as rediscovered living space. A European and U.S. American case study**

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## **Introduction**

New demographic processes influence the population and settlement structure in various mountains around the world. Former emigration zones and remote high altitude regions are rediscovered as settlement areas. This phenomenon, known as amenity (led-) migration, is currently the examination object of different scientific disciplines and scrutinized all over the world. To avoid giving the impression amenity migration only occurs in mountains it is to say, that it also can be observed at coastal areas, lakes, rural areas and cities - depending on the migrants' preferences. This study takes a deeper look at the amenity migration phenomenon in the Italian Alps and the consequences associated with it. Results of an amenity migration study carried out in the Californian Sierra Nevada provide the opportunity, to draw a comparison between the amenity migration phenomenon in two different high mountain areas. The paper will end with an excursus on the impact of amenity migration on the ethno-linguistic minorities in the Italian Alps.

## **Population development in the Alps**

To understand the actual demographic trend in the European Alps and to compare the development in the Sierra Nevada and the Alps a basic knowledge about the historical population development and current societal processes in the Alps is required:

- Unlike in the Sierra Nevada, a first “colonization activity” in the Alps dates back to the pre-historical era.
- In the Middle Ages, however, there was genuine colonization of lateral valleys and high altitude zones with intensification processes.
- A next step in the growing of rural, high mountain regions was the overall population increase in the 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> century associated with new cultivation techniques and land use intensification.
- The industrial revolution led to a big turnaround: Agriculture became less important with people abandoning the rural areas and moving to the cities. In this phase huge areas of the Alps were devalued and only few regions were profiting from the industrial development: on the one hand, industrial plants and cities that were reachable by railroads, and on the other hand tourism destinations with railroad access.
- In the time between the two world wars winter sport activities arose and gave a first impulse to the tourism industry in certain attractive peripheral mountain zones.
- In the 1960s the emergence of mass tourism and steadily improving infrastructure were the initial factors that stopped the emigration process in various rural high mountain zones, specifically in most parts of Tyrol, Vorarlberg, South Tyrol and Bavaria. In this period numerous tourism-oriented second homes and apartments were established. In other

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<sup>1</sup> Austrian Science Fund/FWF Project (P20954-G03) “The Impact of Current Demographic Transformation on Ethno-Linguistic Minorities in the Italian Alps.”

regions, however, emigration continued (Slovenian Alps, parts of Styria and Carinthia, Friulian and Venetian Alps).

- From the 1990s onwards a new demographic trend has developed in the Alps: the phenomenon of amenity migration. Since that time the re-settling of peripheral high mountain regions can be seen as a completely new process in the Alps, and in parts of the Western Alps it has already resulted in population growth.

Between 1951 and 1981 great parts of the Alps were affected by population losses, especially the southern regions and the central part of the French Alps; many communities in the Swiss Alps, and in the eastern part of the Austrian Alps, too, are characterized by population decrease.

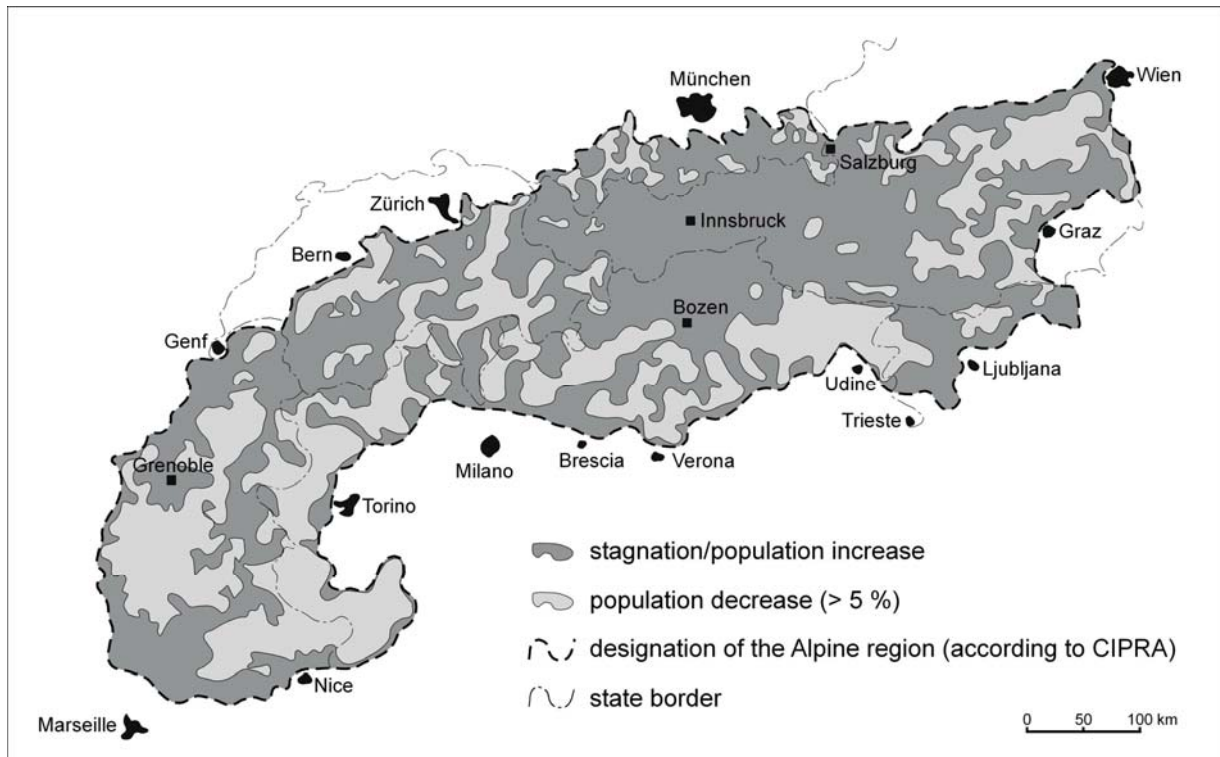


Fig. 1: Population development in the communities of the Alps between 1951 and 1981  
Source: Bätzing 2002 (modified by the authors)

Between 1981 and 2000, positive migration balances stopped the population decline in various regions of the Alps: primarily in the south and in the west of the French Alps, as well as in parts of Switzerland. The situation in Tyrol, South Tyrol, and Bavaria, however, did not change: most of the communities still reported considerable population increase. Nevertheless, in Styria, Carinthia, the Italian Alps, and in the Slovenian Alps, the majority of communities are still affected by population decrease or stagnation, though many of them have become in-migration areas. They do not appear on Bätzing's map (Fig. 2) because the large waves of emigration have left behind unfavorable bio-demographic structures and this new phenomenon has not led to population growth yet.

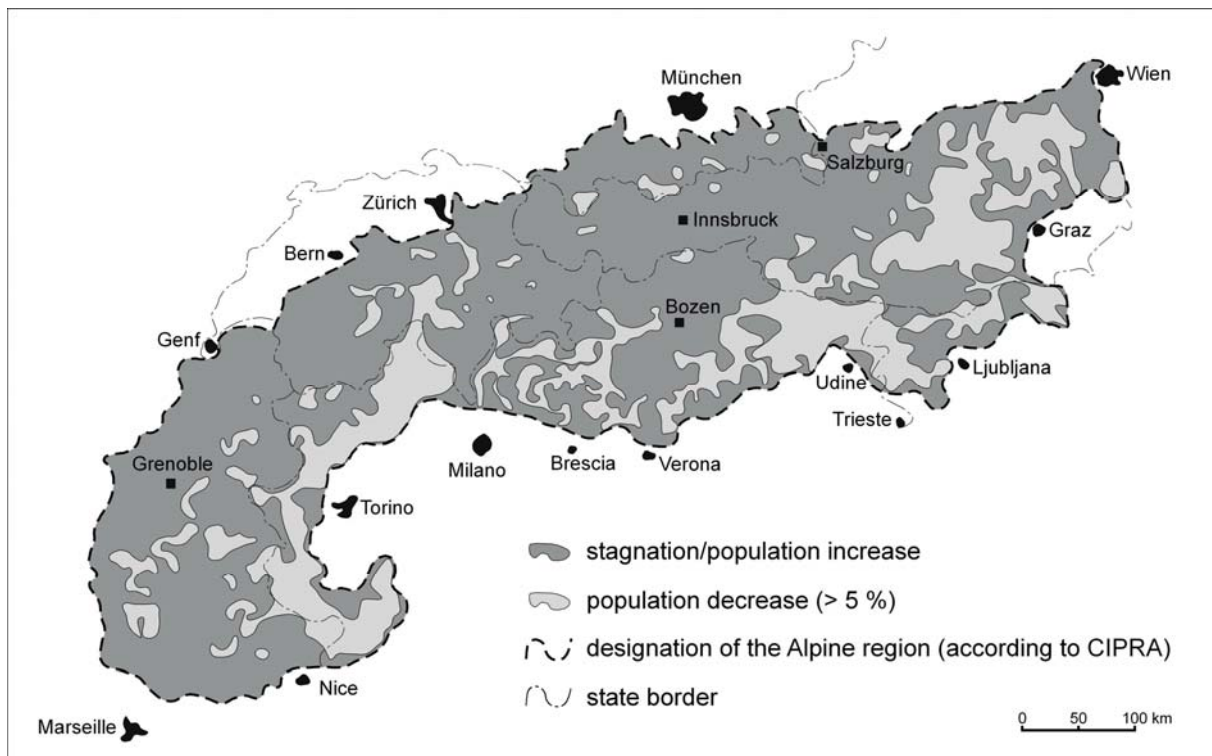


Fig. 2: Population development in the communities of the Alps between 1981 and 2000  
Source: Bätzing 2002 (modified by the authors)

### Population development in the Italian Alps

As shown before, great parts of the Italian Alps have long been characterized by strong depopulation. Fig. 3 and 4 illustrate the second and third stage of the population development periods for the Italian Alps. Except South Tyrol, adverse natural and socio-agrarian factors as well as a lack of non-agricultural job opportunities led to a massive outmigration that lasted well into the 1970s (STEINICKE 1991). Depopulation in the Italian Alps has undoubtedly decreased since the 1980s, and in the last decade many of the Alpine communities have been growing (Fig. 5).

While immigration until a few years ago concentrated mainly around central Alpine areas with strong economic, tourism and transportation connections, analyses by BEISMANN (2009), WALDER et al. (2010) and STEINICKE (2010) show that peripherally located Italian Alpine communities progressively accomplish a positive migration balance (cf. Fig. 6 and 7). Considering the population development since the early 1990s, there are nonetheless areas evident with significant population losses. Even today the effects of unfavorable bio-demographic factors (Fig. 8) – resulting from the migration period – can be observed in many Italian Alpine communities.

Nevertheless, for the first time more and more municipalities in the Italian Alps, which were characterized by population losses in the last decades, now show in part remarkable influx and population gains. Thereby it is arbitrativ to distinguish between the foothills and the interior of the Alps. The population gains in the foothills can be explained through interaction with the Padanian cities and therefore constitute a process of suburbanization or exurbanization (with daily commuting). On the other hand, the newcomers in the interior of the Alps are:

- remigrants who want to retire in their villages (and homes) of origin;
- migrants mostly from eastern and south-eastern Europe;
- amenity-led migrants (urban refugees)

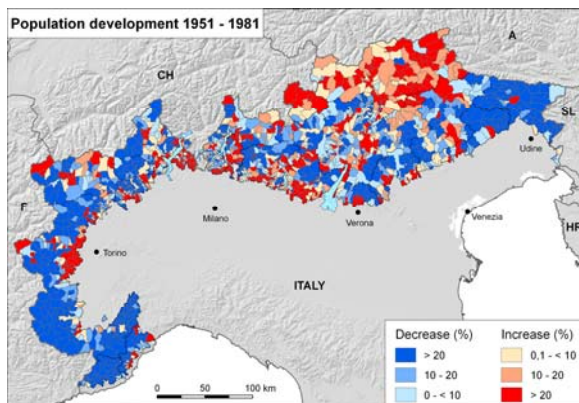


Fig. 3: Population development in the Italian Alps 1951-1981  
Source: Comuni-Italiani.it (calculation and cartography by the authors)

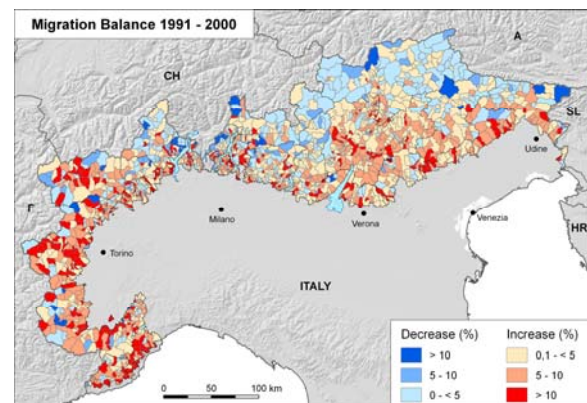


Fig. 6: Migration Balance in the Italian Alps 1991-2000  
Source: ISTAT (calculation and cartography by the authors)

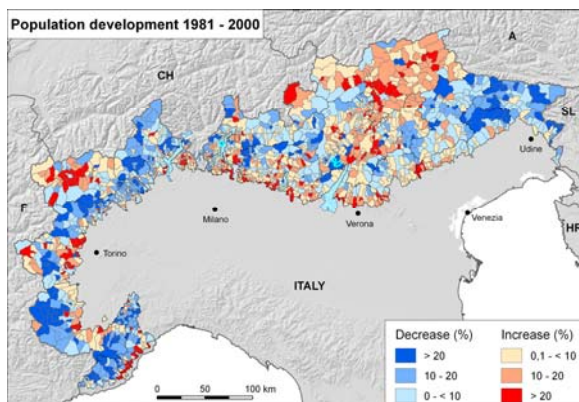


Fig. 4: Population development in the Italian Alps 1981-2000  
Source: ISTAT (calculation and cartography by the authors)

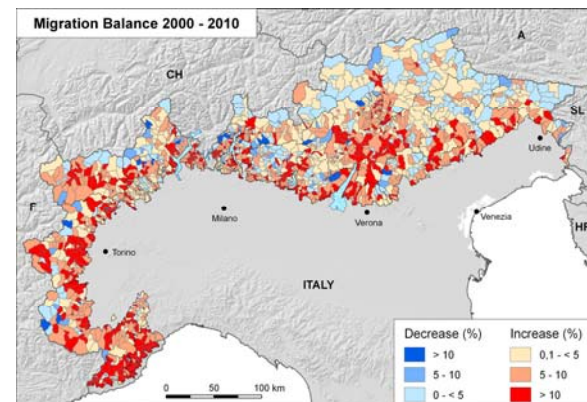


Fig. 7: Migration Balance in the Italian Alps 2000-2010  
Source: ISTAT (calculation and cartography by the authors)

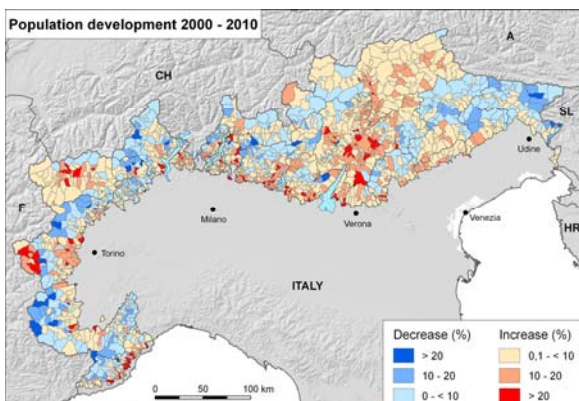


Fig. 5: Population development in the Italian Alps 2000-2010  
Source: ISTAT (calculation and cartography by the authors)

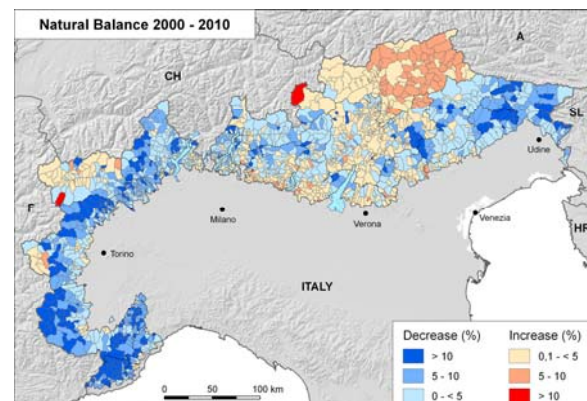


Fig. 8: Natural Balance in the Italian Alps 2000-2010  
Source: ISTAT (calculation and cartography by the authors)

## **Amenity Migration**

In the context of the indicated current demographic trend reversal in the Italian Alps, amenity (-led) migration plays a significant role. This phenomenon constitutes a relatively new field of regional mobility research. MOSS (2006), LÖFFLER & STEINICKE (2007), GOSNELL & ABRAMS (2009) as well as MCINTYRE (2009) extensively describe existent conceptualizations and socio-economic dimensions of amenity migration; it represents a shift in preference of residential location from the urban space to remote, but attractive rural (mountainous) regions. Weekend and leisure residences increasingly serve as a second residence or retirement home, which means that the time spent in the target area expands significantly. As more and more people are job-unbound, the motivation and desire to transfer work-related aspects to the "new" residence is high. These two characteristics – greater length of stay and paid occupation at the destination – are the key differences between amenity migrants and tourists. Yet tourism plays an important role because it can be viewed as a first step to amenity migration.

Both seasonal/intermittent as well as permanent residents contribute to community expansion in high mountain regions. Therefore, counterurbanization – the re-discovery and re-evaluation of rural areas as permanent residential and commercial space (cf. BERRY 1976; MITCHELL 2004) – should be considered part of the phenomenon known as amenity migration.

In the years 2006 and 2009 MOSS published two fundamental anthologies on the subject of amenity migration. In them, PERLIK (2006; 2009) and STEINICKE (2009) discuss its effects in the Alps. The ethno-geographic relevance of this “lifestyle migration” is to be seen in the fact that peripheral spaces and thus minority areas in the Italian Alps became a target of urban immigrants who reinforce the assimilation process in those areas (see excursus).

Amenity migrants bring both positive and negative effects to their new destination. According to WILLIAMS and GILL (2004) positive effects include the infusion of new economic, institutional, and physical infrastructure capacity into the host region. Negative impacts include unanticipated growth-related stresses on the capacity of local social and health delivery systems, environmental resources, cultural and recreational facilities, retailing services, and residential housing supply.

Amenity settlements in the Alps are situated clearly outside a daily commuting distance and, therefore, do not include the expansion of urban areas (“suburbanization”) and the growth of settlements just outside the suburban belt (“exurbanization”; SPECTORSKY 1955). Exurbanization or peri-urbanization processes are typical for settlement expansions in the foothills of the Alps around/next to the major cities (e.g. Verona, Trento, Bolzano, Marseille, Munich, Innsbruck, Salzburg, Graz, or Ljubljana).



## Amenity Migration in the Italian Alps

BEISMANN (2009) dealt with the population development in the Italian Alps since the early 1990s and was able to show a trend reversal for the first time. Many communities that have been characterized by population losses in recent decades now partly show remarkable immigration and thus also have population gains (Fig. 9). Also in communities with a still negative population balance a turnaround can be seen, since the losses at least have become less and this in turn indicates to immigration.

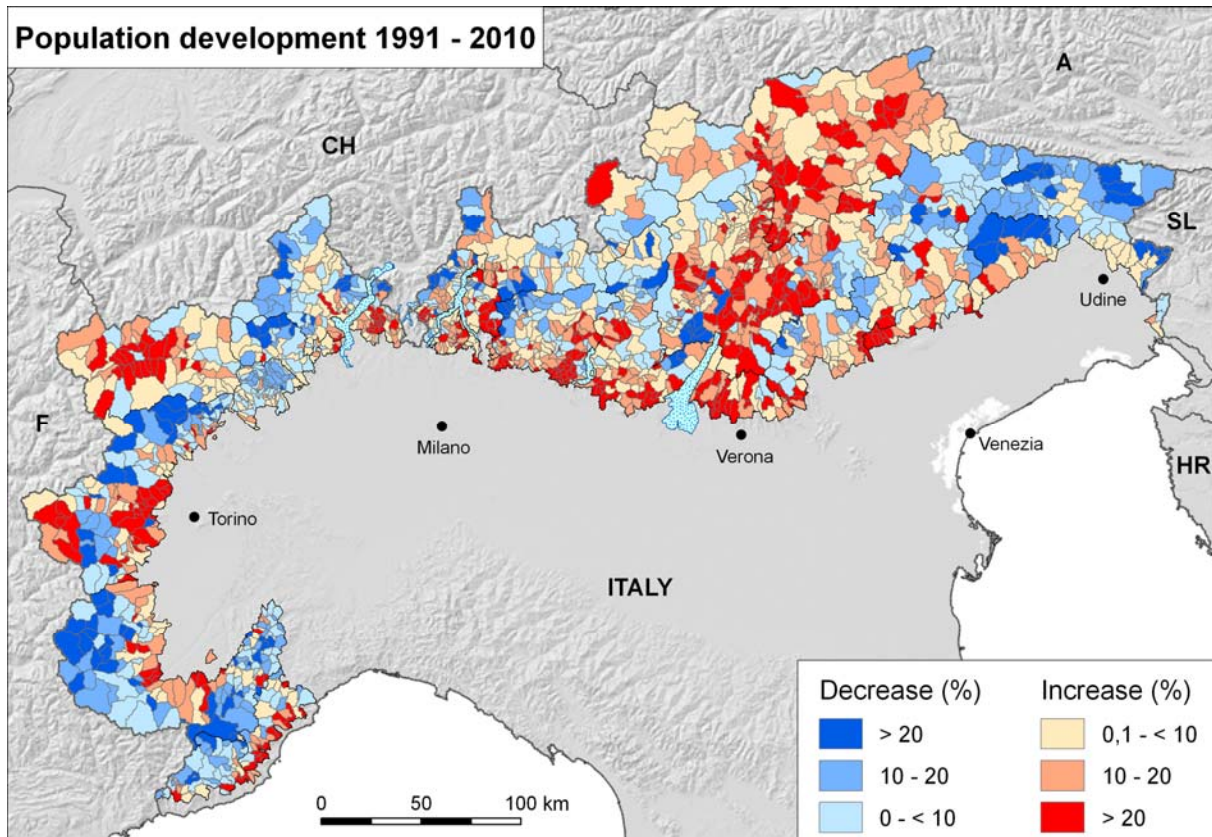


Fig. 9: Population development in the Italian Alps 1991-2010  
Source: ISTAT (calculation and cartography by the authors)

Although an abundance of academic literature exists on population and settlement problems in the Alps (e.g. BÄTZING 1993, 2002; BÄTZING et al 1996; DEMATTEIS 1986; PAESLER 1992) there are few studies about the amenity migration phenomenon, which go beyond the exurbia. PERLIK (2006, 2008) has addressed this problem area and deals with the similarities, differences and the transferability of findings from the U.S. to the Alps. In 2010 WALDER et al. published an article about the consequences of “urban refugees” on the mountain communities and especially on the threat to the ethno-linguistic minorities in the Italian Alps. The phenomenon describes, as mentioned, the shift in preference from the urban area of residence to remote but attractive rural mountain regions. It is the driving force of the current settlement expansion and population growth in numerous Italian Alpine communities. In addition to larger towns and main tourist areas now peripheral high altitudes are affected by the phenomenon of amenity migration as well. A frequently discussed issue relates to the infrastructure (roads, water, energy, ...) in areas with a high proportion of second homes. For one, even for second homes it has to be adequately present, on the other the owner of a secondary residence only pays little contribution to the local economy. It is true that the construction or renovation of second homes have a positive effect on the local economy, but

usually only up to their completion. Negative impacts relate primarily to land use and landscape damage. In addition, land and property prices get unaffordable for the local population and therefore many have to migrate.

A recent study by DI SIMINE and MERCURI (2009, p. 9 ff) deals extensively with the phenomenon of the "seconde case" in 260 selected Italian Alpine communities, with the "supremacy" of the Western Alps clearly visible: the top ten municipalities are three communities in Lombardy (nr. 1: Froppolo with 93.75%) and seven in the province of Piedmont. Due to legal regulations, the last places are occupied exclusively by South Tyrolean municipalities. Based on the targeted 260 municipalities ("comuni turistici"), the proportion of second homes is 60.11% of the total living space. Research in Gressoney-La-Trinité in the Lys Valley (Valle d'Aosta) provides similar results with more than half of the buildings used as second homes (Fig. 10, red and bright green buildings).

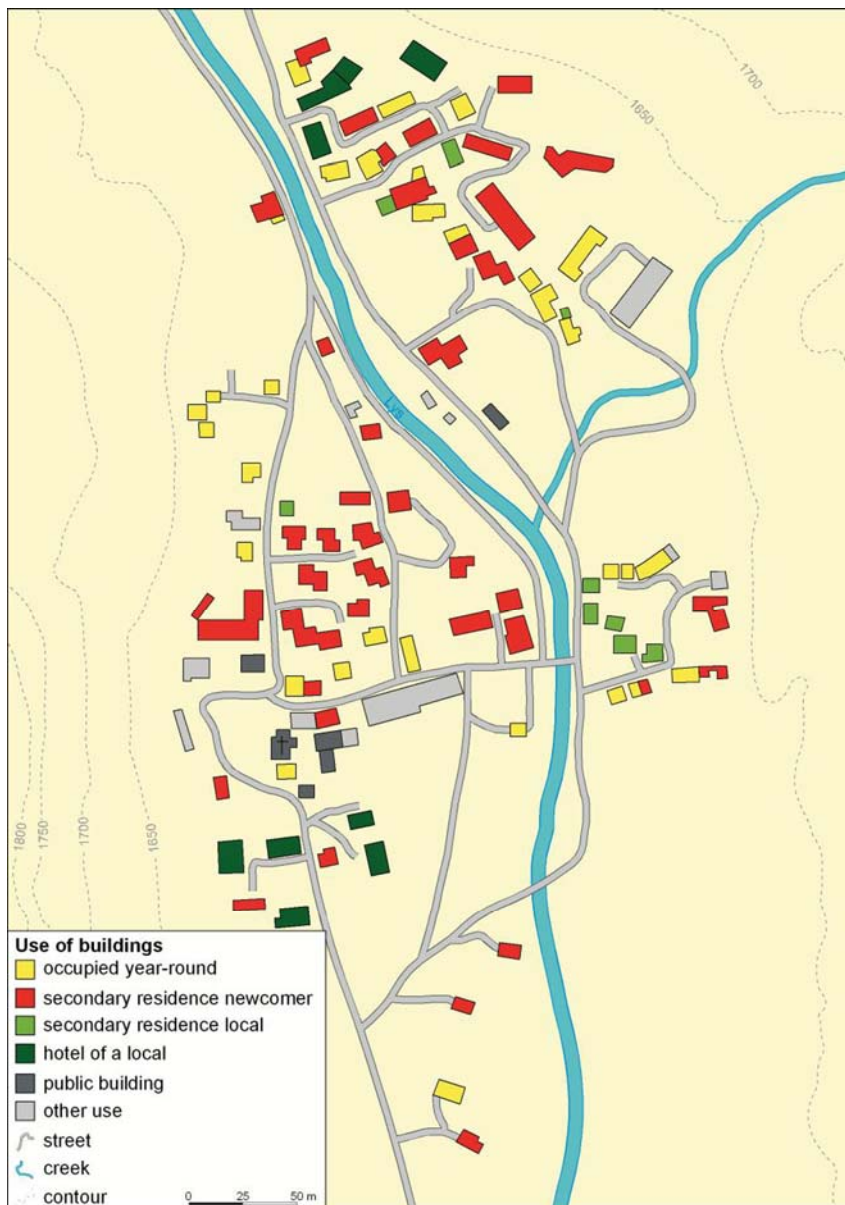


Fig. 10: Use of buildings in Gressoney-La-Trinité in the Lys Valley  
(mapping and cartography by the authors)

Another field study carried out in Mazzin (Fassa Valley) in the Eastern Alps documents the transformation of a former agricultural village to one that is now dominated by amenity and tourism residences (Fig. 11). The positive effect here is that the population is growing again.

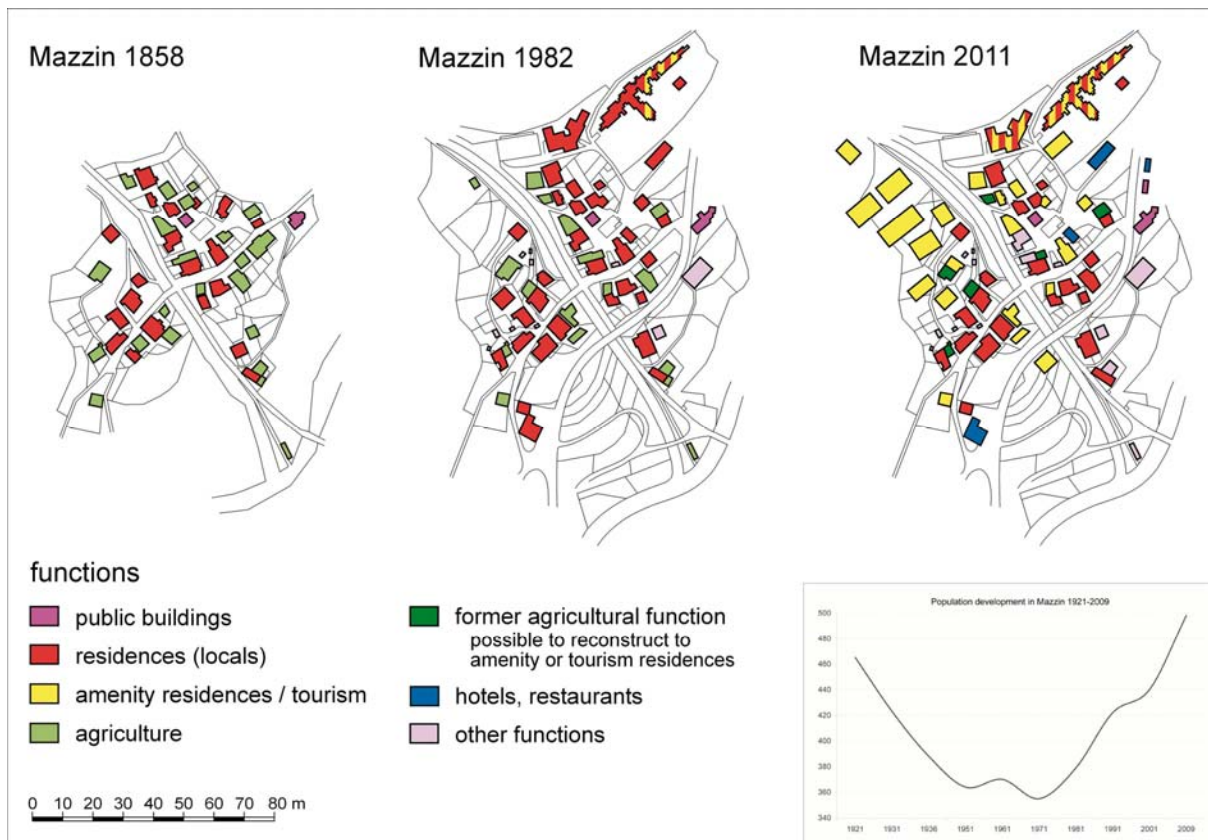


Fig. 11: Transformation of Mazzin 1858 to 2011 and population development 1921-2009  
Source: Loss, A. and M. Valentino 1983 (modified by the authors); Comuni-Italiani.it; ISTAT

In the Italian Alps, the phenomenon of amenity migration is limited only to certain alpine communities. Therefore a fragmented development – population growth and settlement expansions on the one hand, and increasing depopulation up to the point of abandoned “ghost towns” on the other – can be expected to continue.

### Amenity Migration in the U.S. Sierra Nevada

The process of amenity migration is the driving force of settlement expansion and population growth in the Californian Mountains and has profoundly changed the Sierra Nevada during the last decades. The majority of the new residents originates from the Californian metropolitan areas and migrates to the Sierra Nevada because they associate life in the mountains with a higher quality of living. Additionally, safety/low crime rate, ethnical homogeneity, and natural as well as recreational amenities attract people from the overcrowded cities (with great social and racial differences) to the mountains. The relative remoteness of the dispersed settlements in the high mountains is not assessed negatively as modern telecommunications technology is adequately available. High portion of white residents, dominance of younger age categories and male persons, and progressive tertiarization are significant demographic characteristics of the Sierra Nevada. Furthermore, the “urban refugees” have a higher income than the local population and are well educated – far above the Californian average.



In the 1980s people emphasized the “equity gains of urbanites” as essential factors driving the exodus to the mountains. Due to strong consumer demands for housing in the metropolitan areas, many homeowners were able to sell their metropolitan homes for significant capital gain. Consequently, they had economic advantages by moving from urban areas with high housing costs to mountain areas with relatively low housing costs. The high number of newcomers and the restricted availability of private land – only about one third of the Sierra Nevada – have led to an unexpected and enormous increase in land and housing prices in most parts of the Sierra Nevada. In certain areas the settlement enlargement has reached the limit of (private) land to build on. This reduction of land available for developments has resulted in a steady vertical settlement expansion that in some places already exceeds the 2.600 meter contour line.

Besides land use problems and ecological issues, which are involved with settlement expansion in high altitude areas, the enormous increase in real estate prices can be a serious potential for conflict between the local population and newcomers. One first consequence is that low-income residents have to move to less expensive places outside the high mountains. The two major environmental problems are traffic and the supply and disposal with water. Greater traffic volume can also be linked to a dispersed pattern of settlement since sprawl has meanwhile become the rule rather than the exception in the high mountains. A main reason for amenity migration is the fact that urban refugees associate life in the high altitude regions with better quality of life, specifically with the notion of a life far away from overcrowded urban areas. Such expectations have led to a considerable housing sprawl in the woodland areas (Fig. 12). Although the economic disadvantages and ecological consequences of a widely dispersed settlement structure are well known, they were not factored into official county planning.

Tourism still is the driving force of amenity migration in the High Sierra. On the one hand, the (later) immigrants knew about the advantages and amenities of the Sierra Nevada because of vacation and recreational trips. On the other hand, tourism provides – directly or indirectly – a lot of employments.

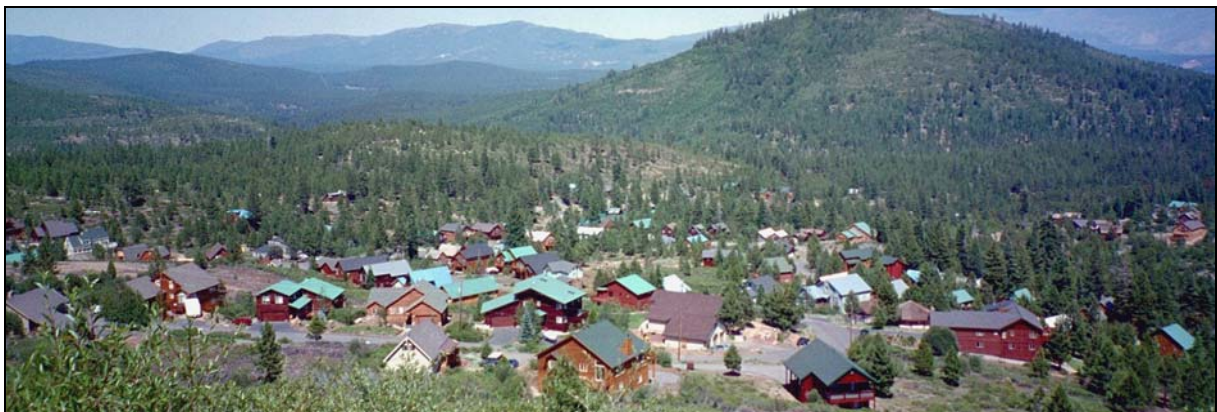


Fig. 12: Housing sprawl in Tahoe Donner in the Sierra Nevada (photography: Roland Löffler, 2005)

### **Similarities and differences between California and Italy**

As in the Sierra Nevada, in Italian Alpine communities with significant immigration gains, primarily the higher quality of life, leisure activities and the mobility of the work are the main reasons for the rediscovery of the mountains as a residential and commercial space. In Italy, the phenomenon is not yet so advanced. Here still cheap land and housing prices are considered essential pull factors - as it originally was the case in California. Another common feature is the growing traffic problem caused by an increased willingness to commute and the growing tourism intensity as well as the sensitivity and limitations of space and the threat to

flora and fauna through continuous expansion of existing settlements and the resulting increase in land consumption.

First results of the study in Italy show marked differences in the temporal development and extent of the described phenomenon, the socio-demographic structure of the newcomers and the distance between the immigration areas and nearest centers, which in Italy is considerably lower. PERLIK (2006, p. 152) sees a further contrast in the relatively small European cities, which have, due to their size, compared to cities in California, not yet developed agglomeration disadvantages.

Especially in sensitive high mountain regions it is important that planning is sustainable and therefore operated with attention due to environmental, social and economic consequences. Thus, for example, due to the increasing demand for land as well as reasons regarding the village character, restrictions and guidelines are needed to curb urban sprawl and prevent the formation of pure second home villages (closed shutters and ghost town character). This implies, however, that such countermeasures are also welcome. Many communities are not yet aware of the long-term impact of current developments. They see this more of an opportunity to strengthen their weak economic position.

Apart from the aforementioned problem areas amenity migration takes a great influence on the ethno-linguistic minority languages, which are mainly situated in high mountain communities - the target areas of amenity migrants. Due to poor bio-demographic structures (migration and the resulting aging of the "locals") and the influx of predominantly Italian-speaking people (newcomers), many of these minority languages are at risk and some at risk of extinction (cf. WALDER et al. 2010).

### **Excursus: Ethno-linguistic minorities in the Italian Alps – case study Valcanale**

Nowhere in Western Europe is the ethno-linguistic structure more diverse than in the Italian Alps. In addition to the state majority, no less than seven linguistic minorities coexist here side by side, sometimes in close vicinity. Problems of the distinct ethnic identification as well as processes of depopulation and re-settlement of peripheral regions carry potential for considerable ethno-cultural changes. The current tendency of reverse migration to remote areas in the entire Alpine region, which of course does not occur in all high-altitude zones, leads urban refugees to the various Alpine valleys, where they enhance the change of the ethnic structure. This process includes the scenario whereby smaller autochthonous ethnic minorities may gradually disappear altogether. Not only future policies, but also demographic developments will have an impact on the survival of the autochthonous linguistic minorities. From approximately 1990 onward, ever more municipalities with former population deficits accomplish a positive migratory balance. Earlier, when mainly the economically induced migration or the birth deficit contributed to the depletion of linguistic minorities, assimilation progressed only insignificantly in peripheral areas. In contrast, the minority members are presently subjected to a greater assimilation process, which first becomes apparent in the disappearance of minority languages from daily life.

In terms of linguistic diversity the quadrilingual Valcanale (Slovene, German, Friulian, and Italian) and the trilingual Val Resia (Slovene, Friulian, Italian) in the extremely north-eastern part of Italy represent the core area of the Alps. Like South Tyrol the Valcanale/Kanalska dolina/Valcjanâl/Kanaltal is the region Italy claimed from Austria in 1919 (VAVTI and STEINICKE 2005). At present, about 20 percent of the total population (~ 6.000 pop.) in the Valcanale are Slovenes and Germans. Both ethnic groups gradually decline. The reasons for this are assimilation (intermarriage and problems of ethnic identification) and to a certain extent also out-migration and birth deficits. Research results show that elderly people in the Valcanale choose local and regional identifications to avoid conflicts with the majority population, the so-called "others." Nevertheless, they still use their autochthonous languages in every day communication whereas the young generations more or less only speak Italian. A

school system where the Slovene language did not exist for decades is one of the reasons for the lack of the knowledge of Slovene. Education and schooling outside of the Valcanale, e.g. in Tolmezzo, Udine, Gorizia, Trieste, or in Carinthia, in Villach, and Klagenfurt, push young people from their homes. Later many of them find jobs in these areas.

As a consequence, ethnic segregation in the Valcanale has largely disappeared; young people do not have problems with the so-called “others” anymore. Thus, one can observe multilingualism (mixed or multiple identities) or simply an Italian national identity. More or less, within the younger generation the Slovene and German languages will likely be lost within the next twenty years. Most of the autochthonous inhabitants have chosen the way of assimilation because they do not want to come into conflict with the Italian or Friulian majority population. Nevertheless, among parts of the younger generation a kind of “symbolic ethnicity” (GANS, 1979) can be seen: they still like and cultivate heritage and the old local customs (Christmas and wedding rituals or architectural styles), but as mentioned, they often are no longer able to speak the autochthonous languages. Consequently, in everyday communication Italian is the predominant language.

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