

Youth Attraction

Rural Challenges, Successes

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Introduction

We have become a culture of nomads. “Where do you come from?” is a question we now routinely ask one another because we rarely expect the answer to be “here.” Discovering where someone comes from tells us about who they are and what their story is — but we never ask, “When are you going back?”

We assume we must leave where we come from to discover who we are. That’s because place is profoundly linked to our sense of self. It may not be at the top of Maslow’s pyramid of needs, but pride in where we come from is at the root of our sense of belonging.

Instead of sticking around the places where they are born and raised, young people are flocking to big cities, and rural communities are becoming de facto care homes for the elderly. In 2010, 8% of the world’s population was 65 or over, a percentage that is set to double by 2050. Many seniors are also staying in rural areas while the young leave to migrate to bigger opportunities presented to them in the big smoke. The global urban-dwelling population is projected to be around 70% (it already exceeds 80 % in Canada) by 2050, many of them millennials.

This presents rural communities with an enormous problem. Bucking this seemingly unstoppable demographic trend is perhaps the single biggest challenge facing small towns and rural regions.

Japan



In Japan, where 27% of the population is aged 65+ and its urban population is exploding, Prime minister Shinzo Abe’s government has [implemented various incentives](#) to encourage young people to procreate and populate rural areas. This top-down approach isn’t changing trends fast

enough. Instead, small-scale, community-driven projects are having the best results. These local initiatives tackle the underlying issues, while creating social and economic opportunities at the same time—a classic case of “[solving for pattern](#),” as Wendell Berry outlined in his 1981 essay of the same title.

The most successful Japanese initiatives intended to slow the stream of youth fleeing farming areas for the cities, are tourism-based. People crave a sense of belonging — instead of looking for it in our places of origin, we often travel to find it. In last year’s [ITB travel and tourism trend report](#), some key millennial traveler habits identified included the hunger to experience authentic culture, encounter different ways of living, and engage with local people.

Yoshino is an industrial riverside town in the Nara prefecture that attracts hoards of tourists for one month each year, who take selfies in front of its legendary cherry blossoms, then leave — outside of blossom season, it’s rapidly becoming a ghost town. With a population of around 7,000, there are just 10 children in the local kindergarten, and an estimated 200 people leave each year for urban centres.

The [Yoshino Cedar House](#) is a new project initiated by Airbnb co-founder Joe Gebbia. It is a two-story cedar cabin with guest accommodation on the second floor and a room on the ground floor that doubles as kitchen/dining areas for guests and a community gathering space for locals. A designated group of elders runs the operation, hosting guests and introducing them to the wealth of surrounding culture and the cast of local characters, such as forest walks with “the guardian of the forest,” sake distilling, chopstick manufacturing, and sushi-making classes with the local chef. All the profits feed back into the community.

On the surface, a steady flow of tourists keeps small businesses alive and sparks employment opportunities. Aside from the small-scale economic injection for the elderly and potential for teenagers to become tour guides, the added boon is that younger residents see the fascination that outsiders find in the place where they come from; it provides an opportunity for the locals to tell the particular story of Yoshino, and in so doing fosters a sense of pride in place.

Fogo Island, Newfoundland

Another example of this kind of pride-inducing initiative is taking place on [Fogo Island](#) off the Newfoundland coast. The issue of youth migration from Fogo Island was drastically accelerated when the Government of Canada introduced a moratorium on cod fishing in 1992, which decimated the island’s principal industry, economy, and self esteem overnight.



To counter this, [local returnee Zita Cobb](#) opened [the Fogo Island Inn](#) in 2013. This strikingly modern 29-room hotel, perched on the weather-beaten rocks overlooking the Labrador Sea, became a lifeline for the island’s dwindling population. The inn is part of Cobb’s [Shorefast Foundation](#) initiative, which provides seed funding for small businesses and intends to inspire young islanders to stick around and keep local culture alive for future generations.

What Are Young People Looking For?

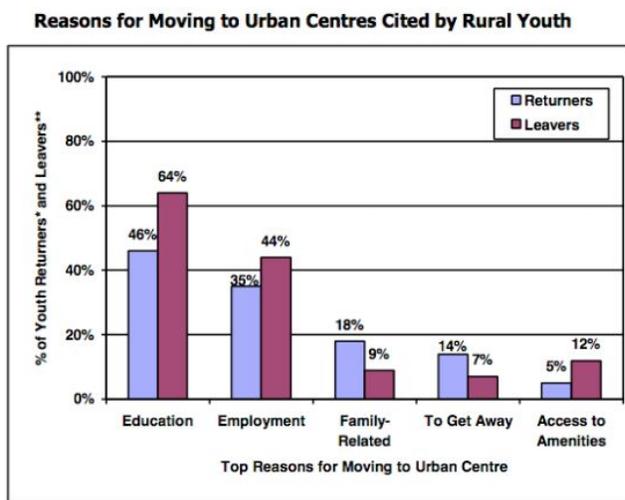


In *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Richard Florida argues that members of the creative class “insist they need to live in places that offer stimulating, creative environments. Many will not even consider taking jobs in certain cities or regions — a stark contrast to the organizational age, when people moved to chase jobs.”

The important message here for rural communities is that they need to refocus their attention on addressing what makes a small towns and its rural setting a destination sought after by young, creative urbanites. Understanding the location preferences of today’s young people will help these communities create the kinds of places that will attract these “people on the move.”

Much attention has been focused on the movement of people to the stimulating and creative environments found in larger urban centres, where young people are drawn to the arts, culture, entertainment – and other creative people. Because of this attention, community development practitioners in small towns and rural areas may be inclined to build their community development efforts by offering urban-style amenities such as pedestrian malls and a thriving nightlife. This approach may work in those small towns and rural areas with unique assets such as lakefronts and mountains, or those located near a larger metropolitan area. But a much different approach may be more productive in most small towns and rural areas.

As the [following chart](#) from the Government of Canada indicates, the top reasons rural youth leave their hometowns are a desire for a better education, and jobs.



Note: Percentages may add up to more than 100% due to multiple response.
 *Returners are youth who lived in a rural community, moved to an urban centre and then returned to a rural community.
 **Leavers are youth who have migrated to an urban centre where they currently reside.

But what are the factors young urban dwellers look for to either return to their rural roots or make the switch from city life to the very different scene in a small town or rural region? Zachary Mannheimer, founder of the Des Moines Social Club, VP of Creative Placemaking for Iowa Business Growth, who has led numerous revitalization efforts in rural communities in the American Midwest. Mannheimer, who is particularly focused on attracting and retaining young people to rural communities, suggests the first challenge for every rural place is answering the simple question, *what makes us unique?*

Too often, he points out, the answer is, “we’re on a river,” or “we have a particular historical building.” Mannheimer argues these answers don’t cut it – a compelling answer, rooted in some combination of culture and entrepreneurialism, must address at least some of the things most young people are looking for in the places they choose to live, including:

1. an active cultural scene
2. fibre optics
3. entrepreneurial culture
4. restaurants & bars
5. breweries & distilleries
6. co-working spaces
7. public spaces
8. innovative housing
9. retailers
10. great schools
11. lively downtown core
12. local public markets
13. good jobs

Note the order of these factors, with a lively cultural scene, high-speed internet, and a vibrant entrepreneurial culture leading the charge, and employment opportunities bringing up the rear. If Mannheimer is right, then so is Richard Florida when he argues young creatives don't "chase jobs."

This doesn't mean millennials have no desire to work! What it does mean however, is that rural communities need to do at least two things well:

- Identify what makes them unique, then convey that effectively to potential young newcomers;
- Recognize the importance of the items on the above list, and do whatever is required to ensure as many of them as possible are in place.

Kimberley, BC

Anyone who has visited the South Island New Zealand town of Queenstown know that building a local economy around outdoor adventure activities can work — and work well — for a small mountain town, boosting the local economy and attracting large numbers of youthful creative types, some of whom decide to stay.

Many alpine communities in BC understand this. Towns like Rossland, Nelson, Fernie, and Revelstoke come to mind, with their focus on and support of skiing, snowboarding, mountain biking, and hiking, taking full advantage of their mountainous surroundings.

The East Kootenay town of Kimberley can be added to this list. Like the above communities, Kimberley checkmarks many of Mannheimer's "small town must-haves" for attracting millennials. And, like the others, it has focused on its outstanding outdoor culture as its most unique asset.



Where Kimberley is poised to stand out centres on Mannheimer’s item number three — *an entrepreneurial culture* — witness the recent formation of the Kimberley Outdoor Alliance.

Headed up by outdoor blogger Matt Mosteller and like-minded outdoor industry advocates in Kimberley, including Kieran Hickey, P.J. Hunter, Kevin Pennock, and Pat Bates, Kimberley Mayor Don McCormick also sits on the board as a founding board member.

Essentially, the Alliance is based on the observation that the town’s alpine location plus the existence of most of Mannheimer’s suggested attributes, perfectly positions it to lure entrepreneurs and businesses focused on the very pursuits that attract so many of the town’s visitors. To put it succinctly, any small mountain town with an adjacent ski hill can attract skiers — but what about the companies that *make* the skis, boots, poles, and clothing they use?

“I believe that Kimberley is the ideal location for companies in the outdoor industry to be located,” Hickey said. “Our excellent amenities, access to international airport and limitless outdoor opportunities provide a quality of life and lifestyle that would attract and keep valuable outdoor oriented employees”.

While just getting underway, the initial goal of the Alliance is to reach out to potential economic development stakeholders and secure funding resources to launch its first phase, including the following objectives:

- Develop start-up priorities and immediate goals and objectives.
- Create a directory of the existing outdoor industry community already living and operating in Kimberley, and initiate collaboration within this community to kick-start the Alliance.

- Initiate stakeholder presentations and meetings to secure start-up funding and resources.

The ultimate goal is to attract bright young entrepreneurs and cutting edge small and medium-sized businesses, generate sustainable jobs, a stewardship mindset, and predictable tax revenues for the town. Brands, retailers, and outfitters will benefit by taking advantage of programs and close-to-home access support for employees and those in nearby communities.

Planned initiatives include:

- Kimberley Outdoor Alliance Base Camp — a collaborative workspace and outdoor industry hub.
- Kimberley Outdoor Alliance Propulsion Lab — an incubator and accelerator program to mentor new outdoor industry start-ups.
- Kimberley Outdoor Alliance Gear-Park — a gear builders' centre developed in the Kimberley Light Industrial Park
- Trade Missions — the creation of outdoor industry trade events such as Outdoor Retailer, Snow Industries Association, Interbike, and Mountain Ventures Summit.
- Industry symposia and outdoor industry press camps.

The point here is that just as many young people are looking for more than just a job, many entrepreneurs and businesses are also looking for locations that both reflect their products, and the lifestyle those products support.

A podcast with Kimberley Outdoor Alliance chair, Matt Mosteller:

<https://www.mixcloud.com/randy-morse2/matt-mosteller-kimberley-mountain-alliance/>

Washington County, Illinois' Five Strategies for Retaining and Attracting Youth to Rural Communities

A recent study in rural America revealed that as many as 81% of young people surveyed would prefer not to live in their local communities as adults. The young residents of deeply rural Washington County, located in southern Illinois, were no exceptions.

Alarmed at the outflow of millennials from the county (with a population of 14,000 — its largest town and county seat, Nashville, has 3,100 residents), Washington County turned to University of Illinois Faculty of Extension researcher, Pamela Schalhorn, to help identify measures that

could be taken to stem the flow, as well as attract young newcomers. [Schalhorn's research](#) resulted in the following five recommendations:

- **Provide improved high-speed internet service.** This was considered the highest priority in virtually all the research material Schalhorn reviewed. Enables students to take online classes remotely from universities located miles away. Young people can diversify by using the internet to earn additional income by starting online businesses. Young people utilize high-speed internet for movies, television (streaming), phones, computer games, news, social networking, and more. They consider it a fundamental aspect of their lives.
- **Invest in “youth priorities”** and make communities more attractive to young people. “Millennials are adventurous, creative and enjoy interacting with other young people,” says Schalhorn. “Make sure you have a coffee shop (internet café). Micro-breweries are also very popular and create other recreational opportunities for young people to hang out. Millennials crave hang out spaces or what they call “third spaces” – not home, not work. They do not find traditional bars inviting. They want to be with others their age, drink beer, play cards, beer gardens are OK, talk with friends and hear music.”
- **A community, supportive of its small businesses,** that strives to have an entrepreneurial culture and builds economic opportunities through entrepreneurship. “Millennials are the ‘entrepreneurial generation.’ They enjoy being creative and innovative. In recent studies, it was shown that 70% would like to own a business of their own and up to 17% already own a small business. Support all of your local businesses both small and mid-sized. One study says that small-town grocery stores are probably a bit more expensive than Walmart, but it's critical that small-town shoppers support their local businesses if you want the young entrepreneurs to stay. Millennials want entrepreneurial education, and the sooner the better. Provide entrepreneurial education beginning in high school. Make sure entrepreneurial opportunities and incentives for young people are available
- **Actively engage and consult your youth** in your community development planning process. Make certain they know you would like them to stay, or to return after they finish school. Make sure they know their opinions and ideas matter by including them in your community planning process. Make sure they are included in any planning that will affect them. Millennials enjoy working with older people, so inviting them into the governmental process now allows them to become better leaders in the future
- **Market your community to young people.** “Remember, what future will your community have without them? People who market the attractiveness of

small towns need to emphasize the small business friendliness of their respective communities to prospective entrepreneurs as millennials tend to be very entrepreneurially minded. Start marketing your community to the young people you want — millennials like news, but it must be digital and short. T.V. and newspapers will not reach them. They also rely on peer-to-peer recommendations, so finding young people that enjoy living in the community to recommend it to their friends can be your best advertising. Once they enjoy living in the community, millennials will market for you via Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc. - Make sure you have online news sources available for them to access.”



Schalhorn points to [a study by Caitlin Howley and Kimberly Hambrick](#), who suggest lower income youth with lower socio-economic and educational attainment levels, often want to leave their rural home areas, but generally stay because they don't have the option to do so. On the other hand, middle to high income youth (higher socio-economic levels) with higher educational attainment levels are more likely to want to stay to raise their families near family and friends, but feel pressured to leave to find economic opportunities.

“Ultimately, both a community’s income and educational levels are dropping as these young people leave. Finding ways to retain and attract youth to your rural community is critical. Providing higher income jobs for these young people is difficult, as we all know, however, providing opportunities and a culture for these young people to create their own jobs through entrepreneurship while investing in places for them to network with other millennials could provide the incentive they need to stay or return after they are finished with school.” — Pamela Schalhorn

Rexburg, Idaho



How do rural places attract millennials? [Rexburg, Idaho](#), population 26,000, has chosen to brand itself as *Millennial City, USA* because over 80% of its residents are under 30. While there can be no direct comparison between a truly small town and a small city like Rexburg, there nonetheless some aspects of the Rexburg experience that may be drawn upon by stakeholders in much smaller towns and rural regions.

Economic development leaders in Rexburg’s region launched an effort to learn more about their rural millennials, using a survey and focus groups.

“So much has been written about what urban millennials want, but this is the first time anyone has formally studied rural millennials to learn what drives them,” says Jan Rogers, president of the [Regional Economic Development for Eastern Idaho \(REDI\)](#).

The study found some interesting things about rural millennials living in eastern Idaho:

- Facebook is the #1 social media platform used by rural millennials, while Snapchat and Instagram are more popular among urban millennials.
- Rural millennials prefer to live in an open area close to an urban centre, rather than in the middle of a city or town.
- Rural millennials are more motivated by the type of work they’re doing than by pay or other incentives.

- Networking with peers, as well as through friends and family connections are how rural millennials find jobs, rather than on websites like LinkedIn and Indeed.
- Poor work culture is the number one reason that rural millennials leave a profession or a job.

Most rural communities have high median ages because their population skews older. The median age in Rexburg is 22. That's 15 years younger than the U.S. average. The growth of 18 to 35-year-olds is projected to continue — the Idaho Department of Labor estimates the millennial population in Eastern Idaho will expand 26% by 2025, compared to less than 3% nationally.

In addition to its size, Rexburg has a number of advantages in drawing millennials. Many graduate from Brigham Young University Idaho (BYUI) and Idaho State University (ISU) to reside in the [Eastern Idaho Innovation Corridor](#), home to the Idaho National Laboratory and companies including Melaleuca and Progrexion. According to Hope Morrow, regional economist for the Idaho Department of Labor, the region's three fastest growing industries are in the areas of finance, science/technology and healthcare. Millennials also enjoy year-round outdoor recreational opportunities at nearby Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks.

“Eastern Idaho has not only offered the professional opportunities that my wife and I need to make a good living, but it also offers the work-life balance that is important to us,” says millennial Mark Baker, who works as director of marketing for the Bingham Memorial Hospital in Idaho Falls. “It's not uncommon for us to wake up on a Saturday morning and say, ‘Let's go explore Yellowstone today!’”

In tandem with the “Millennial City USA” theme, REDI has launched a social media campaign to tell the story of Eastern Idaho's attractions and lifestyle assets through the eyes of rural millennials. It can be found on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#).

So what are the practical lessons to be taken from the Rexburg experience for towns of any size?

1. Listen to your millennials. There are already young people choosing to live in your community. Ask them why they stay, and listen deeply to their answers. As rural business advocate Becky McCray states, “Don't interrupt. I can't tell you how many times I've watched older community members ask what younger people want, then interrupt their answers to tell them how wrong they are. Especially when a young person offers a comment about how little there is to do, older people rush in with interruptions about all the great things the young people are overlooking. Don't do this. When you ask for their insight, take the time and be respectful enough to actually listen without interrupting. Focus on writing down what they are saying instead of responding.”

2. Know your recreation opportunities. You don't have to have Yellowstone National Park in your backyard to offer great outdoor experiences and a quality of life

millennials will want. Take time to think about what you do have to offer and talk with young people you see in the outdoors. Let them tell you what they enjoy doing and how you can make more of it available.

3. Connect with regional educational institutions and employers. Even if they aren't huge, educational institutions and employers are community anchors. Reach out to ones that are nearby even if they aren't in your town itself. Notice how Rexburg is taking advantage of the whole region to connect with young people. Follow that example.

4. Improve work culture. Bring in outside resources to offer business training and to help your businesses understand what "work culture" means, and why they need to change how they think of and treat the people who work for them.

Conclusion



Retaining and attracting youth is one of the most crucial challenges facing rural communities. Those that fail to do so face a bleak future.

In this report we have highlighted some of the essential elements for any youth retention and attraction strategy with the potential to succeed. Settling on what makes a community unique; ensuring a critical list of essential community attributes, from an entrepreneurial culture and high-speed internet, to a good school and innovative housing options, are in place; listening to millennials; and effectively marketing why they should want to leave their urban homes to live and work in a rural place, are all necessary elements.

For more information on rural revitalization generally, see:
<https://www.bcruralcentre.org/focus/population-attraction/>

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