

Chapter 3

Divergent Perspectives and Contested Ecologies: Three Cases of Land-Use Change in Calaveras County, California

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3.1 The Exurban Context: A Place of Simultaneous Social, Economic, and Ecological Change

Exurbia occupies the edges and borders between rural and urban spaces and places. It is significant not just for its spatial patterns and implications, but also for its social, cultural, and political ones. In other words, exurbia can be defined both by its physical structure—often large-lot, low-density housing occupied by urban-oriented residents—as well as by the diverse and sometimes disputed narratives of nature and rurality found there. In this chapter, I argue that exurbia is characterized by the concept of *contested ecologies*, wherein contrasting perspectives of the meaning, values, and/or function of land or resources lead to disagreements over the future of a particular place, environment, or landscape. *Contested ecologies* amount to differing viewpoints of not just people but also environment in place. As a focus of my discussion, I use a comparative case study of three examples of rural to exurban land-use change in Calaveras County, California, to investigate the significance of divergent environmental and ideological perspectives for land-use decision-making and environmental management in exurbia.

“Exurbia” is not a new geographical concept for scholarly inquiry; indeed, the extra-urban, peri-rural, “in-between” spatial and cultural zone known as exurbia has been explored and explained by numerous scholars over time (including, but certainly not limited to: Abrams et al. 2012; Ban and Ahlqvist 2009; Brown et al. 2008; Cadieux and Hurley 2011; Cadieux and Taylor 2013; Nelson 1992; Spectorisky 1955; Taylor 2011; Walker and Fortmann 2003). This substantial body of literature identifies the impacts of exurbia as broad (Taylor 2011), including impacts which are: *ecological or environmental*, such as habitat fragmentation or destruction, which

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creates discontinuous management zones, and other impacts of sprawling residential development; *social*, i.e., being a source of conflict between differing interest groups, such as “new” versus “old” residents or liberals versus conservatives; and *economic*, such that economies shift from being more primary sector or resource based to more amenity-driven and/or post-productivist or consumption-based.

A number of scholars have described how amenity migration and associated exurbanization are changing the ways that rural areas are viewed, used and managed, noting, in short, how amenity migration has shifted the landscapes and social norms of places along the rural–urban edge (Nesbitt and Weiner 2001; Travis 2007; Cadieux and Hurley 2011; Gosnell and Abrams 2011; Taylor 2011). Exurbanites value the rural “in particular ways that emphasize their value as sites of landscape consumption” (Cadieux and Hurley 2011, p. 298), which influences those places sought after as amenity destinations as well as those that are not. The shifting and plural perspectives on the function and value of rural landscapes can have profound implications for the governance of rural space. Specifically, “rural governmental institutions facing exurbanization and amenity migration are often unequipped to grapple with the multiple competing interests that constitute diverse and changing rural agendas” (Cadieux and Hurley 2011, p. 297). In short, exurban land-use change “complicates rural environments, governance, and resource management” (Cadieux and Hurley 2011, p. 298) where it occurs.

These shifting dynamics alter what Reed (2007, pp. 321–322) calls “environmental-management regimes,” which she defines as the following:

...formal and informal institutional arrangements through which public, private, and civic interests work simultaneously (together or apart, in synch or at odds with one another) and within different sets of power relations to influence, make, and/or carry out governing decisions about environmental and resource management.

While such environmental management regimes are literally everywhere—whether we recognize them or not—the functional shifts occurring in environment and society in exurbia make understanding their workings both challenging and critical as the implications for land-use change in the exurban context are multiple and profound. I add to this literature by describing three cases of landscape change in a particular locale and by applying the concept of *contested ecologies*, wherein disagreements over the meaning, values, and/or function of land or resources lead to contrasting perspectives of a particular place, environment, or landscape (Hiner *forthcoming*).

As a political ecologist, I approach social and ecological change as mutually constitutive and power-laden and seek to understand the use of natural resources as mediated by biophysical characteristics and processes as well as socio-political ones (Zimmerer and Bassett 2003; Paulson and Gezon 2005; Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Robbins 2011). Specifically, I consider this study a “regional” political ecology, as described by Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) and elaborated by others (Black 1990; Walker 2003; Neumann 2010), which seeks to ground theorizing in particular places while also drawing out the linkages and “chains of explanation” to help explain local circumstances and outcomes. Three cases of land use and management are presented here, each with distinct and divergent land-use outcomes, and, which elucidate the kind of conflicts identified by the exurbia and political ecology literature. At their

core, these disagreements are about differing conceptions of rural space, contrasting environmental imaginaries, and diverse preferences for how society, the environment, and the government function, which I frame as *contested ecologies*, instances wherein the environment itself, let alone the “problems” associated with it, is contested.

In the following sections, I describe the site, situation, and methods of the study; “set the scene” of exurbia in general and in this particular place; present three case studies and their contested ecologies; and offer an in-depth analysis of one case given its wide-ranging political and policy implications. I mainly focus on one case in my discussion because it is the most compelling analytically, offering a clear-cut and fascinating view into the varying perspectives on land use and private property present in Calaveras County. Moreover, the case presents a site in which the ecological implications of various land-use outcomes are readily apparent. I conclude with an evaluation of the significance of such divergent perspectives for land-use decision-making and environmental management in the context of *contested ecologies* and their implications for environmental management (regimes).

3.1.1 Site, Situation, and Methods

The context of this research is Calaveras County, California (USA), an ecologically heterogeneous county located in the Sierra Nevada “foothills,” stretching from the floor of the Central Valley into the alpine reaches of the Sierra Nevada mountains, mainly characterized by rolling oak woodland (Sierra Nevada Ecosystem Project 1996). With a population of approximately 45,000 (Census Bureau 2010), a generally undeveloped landscape, and only one incorporated city, the county is rural by conventional descriptions (Cromartie and Bucholtz 2008; Woods 2005). While mainly demographically homogenous (the 2010 US Census described Calaveras County as 88.9% white (Census Bureau 2010)), socioculturally, the county has undergone shifts in recent decades away from a strong, historical emphasis on primary production and resource extraction to an economy that is more mixed, more focused on consumption-based activities (Walker and Fortmann 2003), and which features a greater diversity of interests, backgrounds, and occupations among its residents (Mintier and Associates, Environmental Science Associates and Calaveras County Community Development Agency 2008; Momsen 1996; Hiner 2014, 2015, and forthcoming).

In terms of methods, the study incorporates a detailed analysis of three cases of divergent land management strategies in three different locations in the study area, Calaveras County, California (Fig. 3.1). Using these cases, I investigate the values various rural residents embrace and how they mobilize those values and ideologies to influence and enact land-use change. Methods include in-depth, semi-structured interviews, a written demographic and political/ideological survey, participant observation, and public document analysis (DeLyser et al. 2010; Patton 2002; Sayer 2010; Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998). I interviewed the major political officials as well as representatives from various interests and perspectives using a cumulative, “snowball” (Patton 2002) or inductive (Sayer 2010) sampling method, conducting

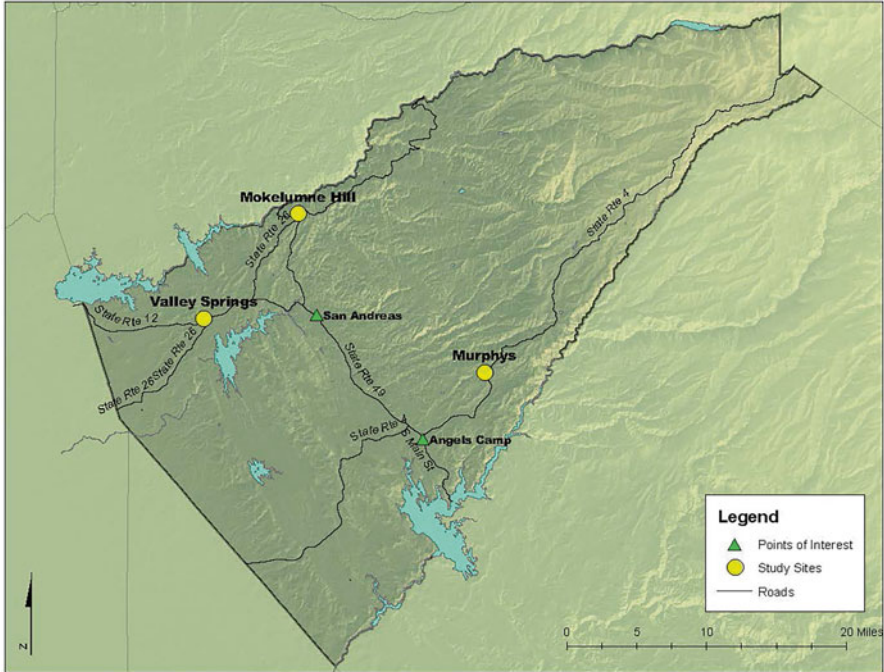


Fig. 3.1 Map of study sites. Produced by T. Filan

51 interviews total. Participation observation occurred during primary data collection between January and June 2010; however, this study was also informed by an ongoing interest in the area beginning in January 2008.

3.2 Exurbia, a Place of Contrasts

As exurban settlement patterns have spread across the landscape, one might expect a cultural homogenization to occur alongside the physical standardization. However, while exurban penetration into rural areas has pushed ever deeper, the perceived differences between urban and rural populations have persisted. Indeed, as I argue elsewhere, as the functional differences between rural and urban places have diminished, the significance of cultural and ideological differences within those areas has increased (Hiner 2015). In short, in order to cope with decreasing space-time¹ between the rural and the urban, cultural ideals and preferences between groups that

¹ There are numerous takes and discussions of how time and space are interconnected and socially mediated, making the perception of space and time vary from place to place, time to time, and from person to person (see, for example: Harvey 1996; Massey 1999; Massey 2001; Harrison et al. 2004; Merriman 2012).

perceive themselves to be different from one another have become even more entrenched. That is not to say that we should reify the rural/urban or been-here/come-here divide, but the reality of social and political conflict in places in flux cannot be denied (Hiner 2014, 2015, and forthcoming).

In order to “set the scene” for the kinds of divergence one might find in a typical exurban place, I offer two quotes from respondents. The first respondent is an elected community leader, who states:

As people drive through the county, they really enjoy the fact that there are trees and grass and cows. Where I think that people sometimes get confused is that they say that land ought to stay that way, and they get quite up in arms when somebody needs or wants to sell a parcel. And this dreaded word of “developer” comes into the conversation, and suddenly people want to organize to keep a developer from taking away their view. [But] they don’t own the view. I have to keep reminding people that, at the end of the day, if they want to preserve the view, if it’s that important to them, then they should go buy the land and keep it looking like it does.

The other two respondents are a pair of in-migrants who are active in local governance processes, who contend:

In-migrant 1: I’m not sure you [can] have economic viability unless—

In-migrant 2: There’s an environmental sustainability...If you put rooftops on all of these [hills] and you put so many straws in the ground that none of them get water anymore, then there’s no economic viability...

In-migrant 1: I would also think there’s a spiritual aesthetic element to it. One of our hydrogeologists wrote a letter to the editor. I think he was up in Twain Heart, talking about the proposed night sky ordinance where you’ve got to aim your light down and not let it bounce up. He very eloquently, I thought, said, “It’s good for the soul to be able to look out and see the stars.” If we lose that, we’ve lost something essential in terms of what it is to be human and that our spirit needs substance. So, I think yeah, at some level, who ultimately wants to live in a cement warren? I guess you do what you have to do, but we ought to be able to avoid that with decent planning...I don’t know whether that’s spiritual, good for the soul, or simply aesthetic.

Taken together these quotes demonstrate the potential for difference in perspective in regards to land use and perceptions of the value(s) of land. In one, you have the idea that open space and viewsapes are enjoyed by all but are nevertheless privately owned. Which means, if you care about those elements of the landscape, you should go out and buy some. Disregarding for a moment that this kind of sentiment ignores the economic, social, or structural issues which might inhibit someone from buying property for preservation, it is indicative of the point of view that the government’s role is not to micro-manage land use. That is the role of the market, in this case through real estate, and, ultimately, private landowner stewardship decisions. In the second quote, the respondents present the idea that there are public goods (and, thus, public “bads”) emanating from private property and that those public goods and bads can—and should—be accounted for in planning efforts. Moreover, the (public) natural amenities provided by such landscapes provide more than simple, tangible goods—they provide spiritual renewal.

In-migrants, particularly those from urban areas, while seen as lacking local knowledge (of traditions, culture, processes), nevertheless “often play pivotal roles in regulating local space” by participating in local governance activities (Gosnell and Abrams 2011, p. 310). This trend can have two opposite outcomes. On the one hand, as outsiders become heavily involved in politics and decision-making, “they” (perceived outsiders or “others”) can end up controlling planning processes and outcomes, often facilitating more strenuous regulatory regimes of which “rural” private property interests commonly disapprove. On the other side, ironically, some newcomers can be stronger supporters of private property rights than long-time residents—even as “traditional” rural players are often characterized as (hyper) conservative. As noted by Yung and Belsky (2007), new rural land owners may be more strict in their interpretation of private property rights in regards to public access and collaborative management.

In sum, the divergent constructions of place and community found in rural areas means there is much room for conflict. Some residents seek the highest form of freedom from government intervention—no matter the cost, smell, or inconvenience—and others came to rural areas with certain idyllic expectations (Bunce 1994). When those expectations are not met or are thrown into question, stakeholders may “work to reconstruct rural space to better match” their ideal (Gosnell and Abrams 2011, p. 311). Indeed, newcomers may adopt a “close the gate behind you” or “last settler” mentality, trying to discourage or prevent further in-migration to protect the asset(s) they recently acquired (see for example Gosnell and Abrams 2011), even though they themselves came to a rural area via the mechanisms they sometimes then oppose (e.g., land development, vacation homes, tourism) (Abrams et al. 2012; Cadieux 2008). The social fabric of rural areas in transition is not smooth, but rough in places. In Calaveras County, actors representing both the “private property rights” and “public good” sides of the debate, as well as perspectives elsewhere along the political spectrum, whether “new” or “old” to the community, are present (Hiner 2015). And, significantly, respondents’ political ideologies are not dependent upon whether they are “been-heres” or “come-heres” (Hiner 2014).

3.3 Three Cases and Their Contested Ecologies

In this section, I present three case studies and their *contested ecologies*; in the next, I provide a deeper analysis of one of the cases. Each of the cases selected are located within Calaveras County, California (Fig. 3.1), and present several controversies and differences in perspective. I detail the *contested ecologies* that emerged from each case, outlining how each is simultaneously politically, ecologically, and socially constructed. Further, I interrogate which political/ideological, economic, or ecological elements or factors are mobilized by various stakeholders in the ongoing process of environmental negotiation and management in rural areas.

1. *Garamendi Ranch* (Mokelumne Hill, CA): The ranch is private property and the rancher is encouraged to pursue the “highest and best use” of the land. However, the ranch also serves as a public good or common resource, providing valuable—and uncompensated—benefits.

2. *Ironstone Vineyards* (Murphys, CA): The Ironstone winery and event center is an economic engine for the region, but one that has radically changed the landscape and lifestyle/culture of the area. The change has been generally perceived as one for the better, but not according to all.
3. *The Ridge at Trinitas* (Valley Springs, CA): The Trinitas golf course, as it is informally called, is a multifunctional property used for agricultural production as well as recreational activities. It is a site of divisive conflict and contestation over conceptions of private property rights, public versus private goods, and the meaning of rurality.

In the following sections, each case will be described in detail, followed by an in-depth treatment of the Trinitas case as it serves as a focal point of analysis.

3.3.1 *Garamendi Ranch*

Garamendi Ranch is located near the town of Mokelumne Hill in Calaveras County. The family patriarch purchased the land during the nineteenth century Gold Rush and, through various other purchases over the years, consolidated smaller holdings into one 2000+-acre parcel. Although not the single largest land holding in the county, the Garamendi Ranch is significantly larger than most residents' parcels. Moreover, the acreage is located along Highway 49, a well-traveled highway connecting Jackson (a regional business/commercial hub in Amador County) and "Moke Hill," the town where the ranch is located. Farther south along that same road is San Andreas, the county seat, Angels Camp, the only incorporated city in the county, and, ultimately, Sonora, another regional hub located in Tuolumne County. Although located along a major thoroughfare for the area, and thus seemingly being readily physically visible, the ranch is less visible symbolically and politically in terms of residents and stakeholders recognizing the resource and thus placing value on it, as indicated by my interview data.

Nevertheless, those respondents who could speak specifically about the property mentioned that the land manager is a model steward of the land, inflicting no negative impacts, and, indeed, likely having a positive environmental impact based on his land management. The main use of the 2000+-acres is cattle grazing, as it has been for generations. There are a few other activities on the property, including: some light manufacturing (a "floating island" company fabricates their waterway-filtering "islands" on the site which are then shipped for use in degraded ponds, lakes, and other waterways), some residual mining (historically, mining was a predominant land use on the property), and the placement of utility infrastructure (a cell phone tower is now installed on the property for a lease) (see Fig. 3.2a–c). Additionally, several hundred acres have been placed into a conservation easement—a voluntary, but legally binding, agreement to restrict development rights, and thereby protect open space, in perpetuity (Quast et al. 2012).

The challenge for cow-calf cattle ranchers (those that keep a permanent herd of cattle for producing calves which are then sold annually) is that such operations are no longer especially profitable endeavors. The land manager at Garamendi Ranch



Fig. 3.2 “Floating island” water filtration pads are fabricated on site at Garamendi Ranch. The site also has some residual mining uses. *Photo credit:* C. C. Hiner, 2010



Fig. 3.2 (continued)

is in some sense a relic in the new service-based, import-dependent, globalized economy (Ilbery 1998; Sayre 2011; Woods 2005). However, he continues to ranch because he values the lifestyle, the environmental and cultural heritage that it conserves, and the consolidated parcel that it protects. He is not alone in this evaluation. In fact, this kind of holistic and multi-valued perspective of agriculture, referred to as “multifunctionality,” is common in the European context (Huylbroeck and Durand 2003; Wilson 2008, 2010). The challenge in applying the multifunctionality paradigm is determining how to value the multiple non-commodity benefits of land use (Haaland et al. 2011; Wiltshire et al. 2011).

The challenges aside, the land manager at Garamendi Ranch thinks it is appropriate that he be compensated for the values and services he produces above and beyond the minimal revenue he can garner from his cattle. Others, when queried about it, seem to agree, but also simultaneously demonstrate an unyielding, ideological commitment to private property rights, which can prevent some from even considering the options available for such compensation (Hiner 2015). There is a small but vocal political perspective in the area that argues environmental protections and regulation are simply a mechanism being used by subversive, socialist groups to degrade or to outright dismantle private property rights (Advocate 2012; Alcalá 2012). This kind of perspective makes policy or programs aimed at compensating land managers for environmental services provided difficult to negotiate politically.

That being said, whether compensated or not, the land manager fundamentally sees himself a steward of the land—land he and his family have managed for over 150 years. This perspective is supported by ecological research: “Private landowners are often de facto stewards of biodiversity and ecosystem services. In California’s Sierra Nevada foothills, ranchers frequently present the only defense against

biological invasions in private rangelands” (Aslan et al. 2009, p. 28). As such, ranchlands are not just iconic features of the rural landscape in the Sierra Nevada, they are an important part of ecosystem management (Aslan et al. 2009; Epanchin-Niell et al. 2010; Huntsinger and Hopkins 1996; Huntsinger et al. 2010; Sayre 2006). As such, landowners play key roles in ecosystem management and sustainability. “Whether we are concerned with sustaining economic growth, conserving natural resources for future growth, or preserving natural resources for their social, aesthetic, or recreational value, the integrity of ecosystems and their viability is a major challenge facing society today” (Weltz and Dunn 2003, p. 370). As the land manager at Garamendi explained to me:

Actually here in a relatively short period of time, environmental groups have partnered with ranchers knowing that if we keep that rancher there, then that land will remain in a condition that we want it, you know, that we would like to see. Rather than him going out, and the land being cut up into subdivisions and ranchettes or whatever.

Despite the important role land managers like the Garamendis play, my interviews generally revealed that the actions and management decisions made on large properties such as this one are relatively invisible to the “lay person” or resident. However, ranchers’ commitment to stewarding the environment does not go entirely unnoticed. One county leader makes supporting ranchers a key element of his platform:

Our ranchers and farmers provide more than just food here in Calaveras County. The rolling hills and beauty of well-kept ranches and farms help make our county one of the most scenic in the state. In fact, the fate of a number of [Calaveras County] communities hinges almost entirely on the continued inclination and financial ability of a few ranching and farming families to work their land rather than sell it for subdivisions. In light of the harsh economics facing most family farms and ranches, this amounts to a form of self-sacrifice or philanthropy. It is in our community interest to help them succeed. (Wilensky 2008)

Moreover, agriculture, as an interest group, is relatively well placed in Calaveras County, especially in comparison to the neighboring counties whose interests are more divided (Respondent 26, March 2010). The “Ag Coalition,” as it is known, is a high profile public interest group in Calaveras consisting of members from each of the major agricultural groups in the county: the Farm Bureau, Calaveras Grown, the Cattlemen’s Association, and Calaveras Wine Grape Alliance. Each of these groups elects two representatives to the Ag[riculture] Coalition, plus there are two ex officio members, the Farm Advisor and the Agricultural Commissioner. Essentially, the group “rather than... sort of willy-nilly representing agriculture separately,” advocates for agricultural issues to the local government, as indicated in the comments from one of my respondents:

If at some point [an issue] comes out as not going our way, then the Ag Coalition [gets] right back into the political arena...It involves a lot of time with individual supervisors, pulling a lot of favors, all of those things that you have to do. And then coming in in strength to the Board meeting. But you need to make sure you have all of your ducks in a row individually first. Fortunately the group overall hasn’t lost strength... Yeah, we’ve had quite a few fights over the last few years.

The Ag Coalition has successfully lobbied for several major policy provisions benefiting agriculture in the county. Their first was the creation of an agricultural zoning ordinance to define, promote, and protect multifunctional activities on

agricultural land in the county. Second, the Ag Coalition successfully negotiated the inclusion of an Agricultural Element in the updated General Plan; an agricultural element is not a required feature of the state-mandated general plan, but it is an option and this group argued that for an “ag county” like Calaveras it was an important addition. Third, the Board of Supervisors instated an Agricultural Dispute Resolution Committee, an extra-legal mechanism by which agricultural disputes between conflicted parties can be resolved.

As demonstrated here, in Calaveras County, agricultural interests are as integral to environmental outcomes as well as political ones. But the significance of landowners’ management does not make the job any easier. Ranchers are working toward multiple goals, which can at times be contradictory. Environmental protections aimed at preserving sensitive habitat or threatened species may be well intentioned, but to a landowner managing multiple agendas, they can become overwhelming. My data indicate that some ranchers feel environmental regulations that are too intrusive are actually counterproductive toward their aims. Over half of the ranchers/farmers I spoke to (8 of 13) expressed some version of a stewardship ethic, and the same proportion of them also mentioned regulation—especially overzealous or overreaching regulation—as a detriment, or a potential detriment, to their ability to manage the land in the way they feel is most appropriate (Hiner 2014, 2015, and [forthcoming](#)).

In sum, the case of Garamendi Ranch can be characterized this way: the land manager is a model land steward in a profession with decreasing profitability (at least within current configurations of the national and global economy), but he sees ranching as a lifestyle choice. His land-use choices and management preserve agriculture, open space, and local history as well as providing ecosystem services to the wider community. Moreover, the landscape he preserves is emblematic of what rural residents expect, desire, and prefer in rural spaces. Ranches like Garamendi’s preserve viewsheds, protect watersheds, and provide open space buffers between rural enclaves (Fig. 3.3). However, the provision of ecological and aesthetic public goods currently occurs with little to no actual compensation to the provider, and concerns over private property rights make valuing the common goods provided difficult (Hiner 2015).

3.3.2 *Ironstone*

The story of Ironstone is one of entrepreneurial enterprise, shifting landscapes, and socioeconomic and cultural transformation. When John Kautz married Gail Kramer, they eventually took over her family’s land in Murphys, California. They bought some additional acreage over time to bring their property to a total of 1100 acres. Just under 100 of that is now planted in winegrapes and, aside from the portion of the land dedicated to the winery and event center facilities, the rest is used for cattle grazing. One of their sons, Stephen, runs cattle on the land as a side operation as well as serving as President of Ironstone Vineyards. In addition, the Ironstone property also serves as an industrial winery, processing many thousands more acres of



Fig. 3.3 A rancher, with his land spreading out “as far as the eye can see” (Warrin and Gomes 2001). Large landholdings such as this provide valuable ecosystem services as well as pleasant viewsheds. *Photo credit:* C. C. Hiner, 2010

grapes grown near Lodi, to the west in the Central Valley of California (Fig. 3.4a–c). The facility is also used as a concert and special event venue (Fig. 3.4d), which can accommodate several thousand attendees. The property is located on a two-lane road a couple of miles outside of the town of Murphys (see Fig. 3.4e).

The Kautzes have been very successful in their business ventures and are known in the community for being philanthropists and community partners. Their summer concert series and year-round festivals and performance bookings are a primary form of entertainment for local people as well as being a major tourist draw. And although there were a couple of wineries in the area prior to the genesis of Ironstone, the wine industry, inclusive of the growing, processing, and selling of wine, in Calaveras—and particularly Murphys—blossomed after the Kautzes installed the winery and built the event facility.

The Kautzes understood that cattle alone would not be able to financially support their land, given property taxes and operating costs, so they sought out a higher value product. In one insider’s words:

When we bought [the land] we knew that we had to increase the revenue off of the ranch, because otherwise the taxes and the carrying costs would eat us alive. So we planted apples and had some very nice apple orchards. But then, a number of years later, China got into the act and essentially put California apple growers out of business. So we had taken ‘em out and we put in wine grapes, still trying to find higher revenue.

But more than simply seeking to increase revenues, the Kautzes had a vision for the area. In the extensive quote below, an insider describes the impetus and process of transforming Ironstone and Murphys into what it is today:



Fig. 3.4 Ironstone processing and event facilities, and the road leading to them. *Photo credit:* C. C. Hiner, 2010



Fig. 3.4 (continued)



Fig. 3.4 (continued)

When we broke ground in 1989 for Ironstone, there was no other operation that even had a conceptual idea of doing what we're creating. And the first thing we did was actually try to utilize one of the shafts and tunnels the miners had left us on the ranch from the mining days. The geologist told us we couldn't do that, we have a solid rock mountain that we're sitting on top of. So we actually formed a mining company and hand blasted the end of the solid rock mountain off and spent the next year hand digging 10,000 square feet of underground wine caverns... And then what we also started looking at was, there was no hospitality center up here, there was no banquet facilities in the county. So it was kind of one of those field of dreams—build it and hope that they come—type of operations. There was nobody in the county or nobody in the Sierras at that time that was doing anything like that. So we saw an opportunity to grow and build something. And, at the time, because there was nothing like this in the county, the county [Board of Supervisors] was very, very amenable and supportive to the fact that we need an anchor on this. When Ironstone was built and opened its doors, there were only 4 wineries and tasting rooms in Murphys. There's 22 tasting rooms in Calaveras County right now. And most of them are located in Murphys because it's kind of become what the town of Napa is to Napa Valley itself. And again the whole perspective of what we were doing was driving agritourism and trying to expand our base to other forms of revenue generation besides the farming itself. Because we knew we could never generate enough revenue off of just cattle, or just the apples, or just the grapes up here.

This quote highlights several important elements of the rationale and beginnings of Ironstone. First, it is striking that in order to get started, the site developers engaged in a comprehensive mining and excavation project. As one respondent put it, Ironstone “cut the end of the mountain off and moved it.” The endeavor represents a radical shift to physical topography and landscape. However, the county government was supportive, or at least did not interfere, because, as this respondent put it,

“there was nothing like this in the county” and the idea was that a large attraction such as Ironstone would anchor the rest of the area’s economy. Moreover, the developers of Ironstone saw themselves as a driving force behind agritourism and building farming viability in the county. And, as one landowner put it, “the survival of all of these Motherlode counties ... is in their development of higher gross revenue crops and tourism. Tourism is by far the very best enterprise for these counties, because tourists come, leave money, and go home.” In this way, Ironstone was a visionary development for (agri)tourism and a catalyst for a major cultural and economic shift to the town of Murphys and the county more broadly.

3.3.3 *Trinitas*

The third case features an exurbanite, Mike Nemeo, who moved from Stockton, a nearby metropolitan area in California’s Central Valley, when he and his family purchased 440 acres of land on the far western edge of Calaveras County. The land had formerly been a sheep ranch, but, from his perspective, was sitting “idle.” Although the new landowner’s perspective was that the land was “idle,” others disagreed. In fact, directly opposite the Nemeo property was an active sheep ranch, which had been in operation for a century and which continues its operations today. The difference then is in perception; for a new buyer like Nemeo the relatively low return on grazing land would not be sufficient for investment and operation purposes. The family across the street, on the other hand, having owned the land for many years would require a much lower financial return to make continued land ownership and certain management options viable.

Despite differences in perspective regarding various management strategies and their economic viability, the land was clearly agricultural. At purchase, the Trinitas land was enrolled in a statewide agricultural conservation program called the Williamson Act (the common name for the California Land Conservation Act of 1965). The Williamson Act is a California law that provides property tax relief to owners of farmland and open-space land in exchange for an agreement that the land will not be developed or otherwise converted to another use (Department of Conservation 2007a, b). The motivation for the Williamson Act is to promote voluntary land conservation, particularly farmland conservation, while providing a modicum of financial relief to those engaging in conservation (Sokolow 2010; Stumbos 2011).² Williamson Act contracts are signed on a rolling 10-year cycle, such that once a property is dis-enrolled from the program, the contract remains in effect for nine more years.³ In the case of Trinitas, after some time of ownership, the

²For a counter argument of the utility of the program see Roberts (2011).

³The Williamson Act was defunded in 2009, and, although it remained in effect, counties were no longer reimbursed for lost property tax revenue (Network 2009). As such, the viability of the program came into question. Funding was restored, but then removed again in 2011 before the program was refunded through 2016 (Campbell 2011). The details of the program changed slightly

new landowner wanted the opportunity to shift land uses so he dis-enrolled his land. However, even though he had removed the property from the program, technically its provisions were still in effect for several more years.

The property is located just outside of Valley Springs, in the community of Wallace. The property is nearby a prototypical exurban neighborhood, characterized by 5–10 acre ranchettes and the so-called “hobby” farms, and populated by many in-migrants (Gosnell and Abrams 2011; Taylor 2011). Seeing an opportunity to capitalize on the property’s relative proximity to Stockton and its rolling hills, the landowner transformed the site into a unique, sprawling golf course. Indeed, the course was dubbed “Golf’s Field of Dreams” by *Golf Today* (Fagan 2007) and was met with much acclaim from the golf world:

The buzz in the golf industry is all about a golf course in the Sierra foothills that flew so far under the radar no one knew of its existence...Imagine the surprise of golf executives when they encounter someone who has been to Trinitas. This golfer talks of a view of the High Sierra peaks almost from Tahoe to Yosemite, and a golf course that fits so perfectly into the land that it looks like it has always been there...There was no architect. There was no construction company... “You might say God built it,” Mike Nemees explained. “The land was that good. The golf course was always there. We just kind of grew some grass.” (Salsig 2007)

This description of the course flying under the radar is very fitting because, as the public debate over the course’s legality and appropriateness developed, it became clear that Nemees was building it without permission.

Once built, the owner sought to establish an agritourism destination, similar to another well-known operation in the county, Ironstone Vineyards. He built the golfing greens around the historic olive orchard on the property as well as planting additional old-growth olive trees transplanted from a nearby property. Using this century-old, heritage olive orchard, the owner revived olive production and began producing olive oil and “lifestyle products,” such as soap and lotion, which are produced off-site. As one family insider put it:

Our whole concept here was to do the Kautz [Ironstone] formula with a golf course and olive oil rather than a concert hall and grapes. Because our vision would be that a lot of this dry grazing land around us...would be converted to high-density olive plantations, which is just like grapes. They grow just like grapes on trellises...We’re trying to create an olive destination, if you would. For olives, olive oil, all the different things you can do with olives. That’s why we branched into lifestyle products for the spa, wellness, and all that other stuff. That whole movement.

In addition to the olive production and golfing, the owner also claims to have created wildlife habitat (via the constructed wetlands on the property, which form the water features on the golf course) and a scenic natural area for recreational activities like bird watching and photography (Fig. 3.5).

over the past several years as the program was virtually defunded and then restored twice, but the fundamental elements have remained: Tax relief in return for leaving land in agriculture for a specified time with a rolling annual contract (Adler 2011; Campbell 2011; Department of Conservation 2007a, b).



Fig. 3.5 Trinitas golf course, showing a constructed pond and olive trees at the periphery of the greens. A blue heron is just barely visible in front of the olive orchard. *Photo credit:* C. C. Hiner, 2010

While the owner painted a glowing picture of his property and its use and value, pointing out the various sustainability measures he put into place and how the golf course created a veritable “wildlife sanctuary,” there were numerous, severe points of disagreement between him and his critics. I focus in depth upon these disagreements because they run the gamut of rural land-use conflicts, ranging from concerns over roads and roadside signage; ecological concerns, such as tree removal and stream (mis)management; varying perceptions of the real and potential economic value of the golf course; and serious concerns over damage to the credibility of the government and the rule of law due to the owners’ deliberate or inadvertent negligence. The Trinitas case offers compelling insights into differing perspectives, or environmental imaginaries, of land use in the county, and as the case was the focus of glaring public attention for some time as the legal battle waged on, the ecological implications of differing outcomes are ready for examination.

In the next section, I examine the case of Trinitas more closely. Although all three cases presented offer compelling stories and sites of divergence between belief systems and actions, the sheer volume and variety of contestations emanating from Trinitas makes it an ideal case for developing and applying the concept of *contested ecologies*.

3.4 Trinitas as “Contested Ecology”

3.4.1 *Genesis Narratives of the Course: “No Fault” or Deceit*

Two distinct narratives emerged from my interviews when I asked about the Trinitas case: one of “no fault” and one of deceit. In the “no fault” telling, the idea is that the golf course “just sort of happened” and/or it was “meant to be.” The owner explains that it began as a personal, “friends and family” course (which is allowable on agricultural land), but then he started to see the potential of the course and expanded it to a full 18-hole course. He says he also then began the process of norming his use to local and state land-use regulations. From this perspective, which is not only presented by him but by others in the community as well, he and his family were ruthlessly persecuted by overzealous NIMBY groups, who had a vendetta against him and his dream.

The term “NIMBY,” derived from the phrase “not in my backyard,” refers to oppositional group activities related to locally unwanted land uses (LULUs) (Dear 1992; Schively 2007; Takahashi and Gaber 1998; Wolsink 2000). “NIMBY” is often used in a derisive sense, as oppositional activities can be perceived to be detrimental to the functioning of cities and municipalities (Dear 1992). While it is true that the so-called NIMBY activity can seriously disturb, delay, or, in some instances, completely thwart public and private efforts at land-use change and development, there are other interpretations of the meaning and value of NIMBY behavior. Some see it as an exercise of the democratic process, as a means for interrupting dominant narratives of use, function, and value (Gibson 2005; Hiner and Galt 2011; Lake 1993). Nevertheless, crying “NIMBY” is a frequent and often effective mechanism for shutting down one’s opposition, no matter the merits of either side’s case (Lake 1993).

In this context, Trinitas is a “Field of Dreams” story; one man, against the odds, making a dream come true. And many appreciated or bought into this narrative. Golf enthusiasts became members and investors invested. Indeed, the owner even received assurances from the planning director at that time that this was an acceptable use (i.e., agritourism on agricultural land) and that he would ultimately prevail in his zone change and/or permit applications. Multiple accounts note that the landowner was even accompanied by a county official to the bank in Stockton where he received a large loan to move the plan forward.

On the other hand, there is a very different story told by Trinitas opponents. Opponents see the whole incident as a deliberate, manipulative act of deceit. They very much see the project, the process, and the outcome as purposeful. They believe the landowner or “developer”—a term that was generally used by respondents in a pejorative sense—concealed his intentions, plans, and activities deliberately, with the intention that it is “better to ask forgiveness than permission.” Nearly 20% (8 of 45) respondents mentioned this concept in regards to Trinitas’ development approach. Here is one representative’s take on it:

I was on the planning commission when Nemee first submitted his proposal. [The land] was in ag[ricultural] reserve [the Williamson Act]. A golf course is an acceptable use if you are talking mowed grass and some holes, but not for commercial uses. A commercial golf course is not acceptable for Williamson Act property...I am not sure, but I speculate that he thought it would be easier to get forgiveness than permission. It was an unwise tactical error.

From this point of view, Nemee is seen as secretly building the course to avoid going through the proper legal processes for such a land-use change. Moreover, this perspective contends that he knew what he was doing—building an illegal golf course—but hid it, hoping to “get away with it.” People advancing this perspective suspect he manipulated the process—and the public—in order to get what he wanted despite the evident environmental impacts.

3.4.2 Contested Ecological Viewpoints

In addition to having highly divergent conceptions of how the golf course came about, people on either side of the Trinitas issue also (re)presented contested and varied ecological viewpoints. From the landowner’s point of view, the environment of the former sheep ranch located at the far western edge of the county (close to San Joaquin County line and the city of Stockton) benefitted from his management. The site hosted over 1000 old growth olive trees, rolling oak woodland, and a full-fledged golf course. Specifically, Nemee felt he had improved the natural amenities while increasing the economic potential and performance of the property. He transformed an “idle” and marginal landscape into an agritourism destination that utilized the natural amenities—the physical landform, heritage olive orchard, and abundant water supply—to simultaneously promote agriculture and encourage economic development.

On the other side, his detractors presented a starkly different ecology. The naysayer point of view is that viable agricultural land was removed from production, ignoring the land conservation protections in place and disregarding zoning designation. The land was initially under the protection of the Williamson Act, which restricts the land to use directly related to agriculture. However, in operating a commercial golf course, Nemee was, according to opponents of the course, breaking state and county rules that prohibited other commercial activities on land zoned as agricultural.

3.4.3 Negotiating “Acceptable”

Whether accepted by observers or not, the owners of Trinitas claimed to be an agritourism destination, in which case they would have been within the limits of their zoning, but, as suggested, this argument was not universally accepted. In fact, the

issue went to court, where a bankruptcy judge ruled that golf is not agritourism. The Nemees appealed to the District Court, but, before a ruling was made, the property was foreclosed and ownership reverted back to the bank, making the agritourism ruling moot (George 2012b; Nichols 2012).

The legality issue aside, from the detractor's point of view, Trinitas represents numerous un-monitored and un-mitigated environmental transgressions, including: the illegal removal of trees; the redirection and cobbling of stream beds without proper regulatory oversight; excessive and irresponsible pumping of groundwater, which led to neighbors' wells running dry prematurely; and concerns about pollution due to the application of pesticides and fertilizers to the golfing greens.

The controversy took on epic proportions and became like a battle of "good versus evil" as both sides claimed the moral high ground on issues that were variously—and sometimes simultaneously—material, environmental, and symbolic (Hiner forthcoming). Many respondents argued that the owner of Trinitas likely would have "gotten away" with asking for forgiveness rather than permission in earlier times. For example, some respondents noted that Ironstone began much in the same way as Trinitas:

[Ironstone] pretty much started—they did exactly the same game that Mike [of Trinitas] did. Maybe I shouldn't call it a game. You know, they came in and—see, Mike was just coming in and he was building a private golf course. Then, as it turns out, it is commercial. John [of Ironstone] came in and they had 9,000 acres of grapes in the valley, and so he said "I just want to put a little mini winery on the property in Murphys." And that sort of snuck through pretty quick. At the time, they had no grapes planted there. They had a few apple trees and cows. And so, you know, by all standards they don't want you putting in a winery if you don't have grapes. But then they just put in a winery. And then, all of a sudden, [it] was going to become a destination situation. And then they started expanding it. And then that is when they got a little criticism about the roads. But he let it grow so fast that he was skating all over the county.

The above respondent, a long-time observer of county agriculture, describes beginnings of both the Ironstone and Trinitas sites, beginnings which are remarkably similar. He implies that had the circumstances been different, Trinitas may have been able to "sneak" their project through the permitting processes in a similar way by getting in and making something happen so fast that there is no stopping it. However, not only were the merits and circumstances of the project different, the county was different—as was the planning context. This same respondent, a long-time observer and advisor to agricultural policy, continued:

Probably the other difference is that the county matured a little bit between the two projects. They've had other developers try to [do the same thing]—you need to grow up and start worrying about planning. They haven't yet, but they are.

So, in other words, the county had become more sophisticated in terms of planning and governance between when Ironstone and Trinitas were established.

In fact, several respondents made the Ironstone-Trinitas connection in that Ironstone also radically shifted the use of a piece of agricultural land but has faced little to no backlash. One respondent went so far as to say that Ironstone did not follow the rules completely either and are still in the process of correcting their

oversights. In a pointed letter to the editor published in the *Calaveras Enterprise*, one observer put it this way:

“Agritourism” is a vague word and the ordinance should be stricken. “Agritourism” has no accepted meaning in the law. It is an invented term—made up—likely coined to support mixed use property such as the Ironstone Vineyards and other vineyard and tasting venues used for concerts and other large social gatherings that have come to the County under the radar. The word itself is a contraction of two words, “tourism” and “agriculture.” Golf is tourism. It attracts players from within and without the County. In the western part of the County, it will attract golfers from Stockton and the Bay Area. And, golf is conducted on large acreages of land on which grass is planted, nurtured, and grown. It is Agritourism at its best. Other forms of agriculture that bring in tourists [Agritourism] would be winegrape growing acerages [sic] complete with tasting rooms and concert venues, Christmas tree farms which invite visitors and sell to the public, and pumpkin patches which do the same. The judge is wrong to exclude the golf course. Excluding people because you don’t like them is not good government. (Arkin 2011)

This person, evidently, is a Trinitas supporter and he makes his position clear. Indeed, his point that “golf is conducted on large acreages of land on which grass is planted, nurtured, and grown” (Arkin 2011) is accurate. That said, golfing greens do not produce an agricultural product, but rather a landscape on which to play a game. It is striking, though, that he specifically mentions Ironstone in the piece, noting that, in his opinion, Ironstone came to the county “under the radar” (Arkin 2011). In other words, some respondents, like this editorial writer, noticed a similarity between the two sites in terms of their beginnings. Beyond that, however, the similarities end.

3.4.4 Trinitas: The Legal Battle

In their final attempts to save themselves and their “maverick” golf course, the Nemees, via their attorney, Ken Foley, argued in a federal court filing that Trinitas had been the subject of discriminatory treatment by Calaveras County, which had twice denied them the necessary permits to operate legally (Eggleston 2012a). They claim the county government was discriminatory because officials had “look[ed] the other way” when it concerned alleged code violations by Ironstone (Eggleston 2012a). The filing claimed two former planning directors and a former community development director “were told not to take action against the vineyard owner” (Eggleston 2012b). Although two of the three former officials disputed the claims, the one who had been in the position earliest, Ray Waller, did not disagree, saying: “Yes, everybody was told that. The Board of Supervisors didn’t want a thing done with this because everybody thought Ironstone was such a great thing for the county. They thought Ironstone’s owner would follow up and make things right [i.e., acquire any required permits or permissions], but he never did” (Eggleston 2012b). Mr. Waller refrained from mentioning who had given him this instruction, but the County Supervisor for that District, Tom Tryon, long-standing in his office, denies placing any such restrictions on the staff regarding following up with zoning code compliance. In fact, he said, “I’ve tried and tried to get them to come into

conformance,” which, incidentally, implies that they are not currently (or have historically not been) in “comformance” (Eggleston 2012b).

However, John Kautz, the patriarch of the Ironstone family, is quoted saying: “We’re not the issue. It’s an issue between Trinitas and the supervisors, and we’re getting dragged into it” (Eggleston 2012a). The former Community Development Director said: “I think if you look at the testimony, we all agreed Ironstone needed some additional permits, but I had not been told to leave Ironstone alone” (Stephanie Moreno, Community Development Director at the time, as quoted in Eggleston 2012b). Meanwhile, the Kautzes denied the allegations that Ironstone is out of compliance with Calaveras County codes (Eggleston 2012a). The manager, Stephen Kautz (John Kautz’s son), when asked if the company was missing any required permits, responded: “Not that we’re aware of. We’ve been doing this same thing as far as the concerts, the vineyard and the winery operations, for 10 or 12 years, and we have all the permits that are necessary” (Eggleston 2012a).

Moreover, “Ironstone Vineyards operates under different zoning than Trinitas and the frequency of its concerts, about eight each summer, doesn’t compare to the daily use of a commercial golf course” (Eggleston 2012b). And when John Kautz built the Ironstone winery and tasting room in Murphys in the 1990s, there “was no agritourism ordinance,” since the policy was adopted in 2006 (Nichols 2011a). However, county codes requiring building and event permits were in existence. Waller, who was the Planning Director at the time, notes that the Kautzes did follow protocol in terms of building permits, but that event permits were another matter (Nichols 2011a). Indeed, as mentioned by many respondents in my sample, Ironstone events are well known for their associated traffic problems, such as increased car volume on small county roads before events and long lines of cars leaving the area afterward.

The negative impacts aside, Stephen Kautz argues, “Ironstone literally has changed the county and its economic conditions. We’ve brought people here, filled the motels and restaurants. To tear us down is crazy” (Eggleston 2012a). And, indeed, Ironstone was vindicated when Calaveras County officials denied all of the Nemees’ claims “concerning allegedly inconsistent and special treatment of Ironstone Vineyards under agritourism zoning rules” (George 2012a). In fact, the official response to the Nemees’ legal brief was that Ironstone was not relevant to their case and their arguments are “creatively misleading at best and intentionally false at worst” (George 2012a), which is an apt summary of how many view the golf course’s *modus operandi* since day one.

Nevertheless, as the court documents and arguments proceeded, the facts of the Trinitas case became clear: The owner of the land, whether through deliberate or accidental negligence, built an illegal, aka “non-conforming,” golf course on agricultural land. He attempted to come into legal compliance, by seeking permits under the new agritourism ordinance, but was twice denied. Following that outcome, he filed bankruptcy to stay the cease-and-desist orders administered by county officials and took to the courts to (1) seek a ruling in his favor on the agritourism issue and (2) resolve the pending foreclosure with the Community Bank of San Joaquin. Both

of these pursued outcomes were feasible at the time due to the circumstances of the lawsuits, as described by a local reporter:

The agritourism lawsuit is in bankruptcy court, because the Nemees in 2009 filed for bankruptcy. If the lawsuit forces the county to recognize golf as a legal form of agritourism, the Nemees say it will make the business viable and allow them to repay the millions they've borrowed from a bank and private investors, many of them from Stockton. (Nichols 2011a)

The legal ordeal dragged out for 2 years as the “very small one-branch bank” was forced to accept only partial payments on its largest outstanding loan, worth \$2.4 million (Nichols 2011b). However, the presiding judge was “not entirely sympathetic and pointed out that the bank played a role in constructing an illegal golf course”; he noted, “Everybody knew what was being built out there was not in compliance with the zoning” (Nichols 2011b). In the end, the stay on a foreclosure auction was lifted as it became clear the Nemees were not likely to prevail. The two parcels making up the golf property were auctioned off in March and April 2012, which then made the agritourism issue moot as the property was no longer owned by the Nemees (Nichols 2012).

Despite the ultimate failure of the Nemees' claim against the County, it is interesting to note that the District Court judge “agrees that the Nemees raise serious questions as to whether the golf course is a permissible use on the property” (George 2012b). So although the agritourism issue seems to have been resolved in terms of its relevance for Trinitas specifically (because the judge was only ruling whether Trinitas fit Calaveras County's particular agritourism guidelines at the time of the dispute), the conceptual issue is not resolved regarding whether golf constitutes agritourism more generally. In short, although the battle is over, the conceptual and ideological conflict over the form and function of rurality—as codified in zoning regulations and their interpretation—continues.

3.4.5 A Case of Divergent Perspectives

Although the property has now been foreclosed, reflecting on the Trinitas supporters and their reasons for support remains a fruitful site of analysis to explore the variety of perspectives observers held about the case. For example, the Calaveras County Chamber of Commerce wrote an opinion piece in 2010 showing support for the owners of Trinitas and their right to due process (Calaveras County Chamber of Commerce 2010). The Chamber's main points were frustration with “being pushed around by special interests”; lodging formally their support for business and investment in the community, as they themselves are business people and investors; registering the opinion that Trinitas “was prematurely tried and convicted by a partisan press, a handful of activist neighbors and a personal agenda by a county employee” in the public hearings on the issue; and that their support stems from the merits of the project, noting: “The project is a good one. It provides a beautiful setting that is a permanent preservation of land. Trinitas is a challenging upscale course that will bring visitors from other counties to spend their money here.” Of course, the key to

the conflict is a difference in preferences regarding what is worth preserving and how. The Chamber's overarching point was that they support business, the constitution, and the due process of the law:

When we have a business like Trinitas, and members like the Nemees, that are being deliberately and unfairly targeted for destruction, we must support them. For too long, our business community has stood idol [sic] on important economic issues. This time, the ambivalence has ended. People are fed up with being pushed around by special interests... It's wrong to destroy a business without putting it in front of a fair and impartial entity to make the call... We still believe the best path for our County to take is one of negotiation to try to find a way for Trinitas to work. (Calaveras County Chamber of Commerce 2010)

This sentiment emerged from other sectors of the community as well, who, although upset perhaps by the way the owners of Trinitas had gone about the development of the course, recognized its potential as an asset to the county. Some people argued for negotiation and compromise rather than divisive bickering. Nearly a quarter of my respondents (12 of 51) noted a compromise between the landowners and the county government would be an acceptable or preferable outcome to the controversy. However, ultimately emotions ruled the discourse around the case. Emotional investment is not uncommon in disputes of this kind. As one person noted:

I think a lot of the cases that are happening in this county in the last, say, 10 years, have developed into more a personal problem, and less so of a real problem... You can take a very small conflict or compatibility issue, and it can turn into a very major thing that can impact state or county policy. But it was more about some personal thing... rather than what the problem was at the outset. But they'll carry that problem saying that's the reason. But the real reason is it'd become personal.

A land-use dispute becoming personal and taking on a life of its own is not unique to Trinitas, but the ways in which such conflicts are resolved can vary (Hiner [forthcoming](#)). One suggestion for resolving the Trinitas issue was to come up with a mutually agreeable compromise. Some members of the Ag Coalition worked with Nemees to devise such a compromise:

"Let's do what we can to make this into a very positive [thing] and minimize those impacts that the people have expressed concern about." And Mike came forward with such a proposal and I don't think it was seriously looked at by the county. Or, I don't know, because there were others involved, it becomes a political thing is what happens. And better reasoning and rationale seem to fly out the window.

Also, fundamentally, the golf course remained a "club good" rather than a public one (Cornes and Sandler 1996; McNutt 2000; Warner 2011), and stakeholders outside of the "club," i.e., the circle of beneficiaries, found it difficult to support.

Some hoped the property would remain a ranch, but without viable compensation in place for ecological services provided by the property and/or a manager with a long-term commitment to ranching as a form of open space (like the manager at Garamendi), ranching as a land preservation strategy is tenuous, particularly since new buyers would likely acquire a sizable debt from the purchase, constraining their options for use. In other words, any buyer must consider what types of uses will generate enough income to sustain the loan payments and their livelihood. Ultimately, in-migrants change the form and function of the landscape in multiple

ways, including driving up land values, which, in the end, influences which management strategies are viable. Moreover, even if a buyer was to keep the land in open space, the implication is that, at any time, an investor could “swoop in” with a nice offer and make it “rooftops” (i.e., a subdivision). As such, it is of interest to stop and consider what the alternative to the golf course is: likely more exurban ranchettes instead of productive agriculture balanced with golf. One respondent puts it this way:

I think that if they did nothing and if they got rid of the golf course and everything, that parcel could be developed into 20-acre lots under current zoning. Would that be better? Going back to the big picture: Cutting that into 20-acre parcels, is that better than having a golf course with 7 home sites clustered in a corner and having the balance of it either habitat or olive orchards? I would say the latter would be preferable to me.

So, while the legal aspects of the case took on a life of their own, the agricultural community (as represented by the Ag Coalition) was generally supportive of having an additional agritourism destination to promote and build the stature of agriculture in the county. And Nemees had in fact worked with the Ag Coalition in support of the “Calaveras Grown” label, an initiative to market local agricultural products (Calaveras Grown 2012). In other words, the site could have been an asset to the community, but instead was embroiled in a bitterly divisive cultural and legal dispute. Nevertheless, a compromise—had it been considered—could have mitigated the concerns of many community members while still serving the purposes desired by the landowner.

Surely some of the environmental claims made by the course opponents had a real (read: observable or objective) ecological or material basis, but, according to inside sources, the landowner pursued sustainability practices to maximize economic potential while minimizing environmental harm. One compromise solution suggested by a prominent agricultural promoter in the county (Respondent 2, January 2010) involved halting all construction, improving habitat conservation measures, increasing the agricultural uses of the property, and, with certain restrictions, allowing for continued use of the course commercially. Such a compromise might have been a “win-win” scenario. Nevertheless, the owner’s mitigation efforts, earnest or no, in effect or proposed, were washed away by the anger of his opponents.

I think, unfortunately, the way that was handled, it’s just a mess. . . . People . . . they’ve taken sides on that issue and it’s polarized the county. And anytime that happens I think it’s bad. If [Trinitas had] been handled right, [and] I think it could have been handled properly both by the county and by the owners, that they might have had a very nice project.

The Trinitas issue was deeply polarizing, and exposed—and perhaps even deepened—the land-use-related ideological perspectives of those involved in and observing the case (Hiner 2015). Some of the opposition might say that keeping the land as grazing ground would be the “best” option, but, as the land sat idle (i.e., not used for any purpose, including grazing) for some years, clearly, it was not a use which was appealing to potential users/suitors/owners. The real problem, it would seem, was the *offense* of the golf course; the fact that the landowner put a golf course on agricultural land without a conditional use permit

(basically an exception from his zoning designation) and without adhering to any of the required environmental and regulatory protocols. Not just the offense of neighbors being ignored and cast as irrelevant in the planning process (as demonstrated by the owners' complete disregard for land-use regulations and the public processes that would be necessitated by such a land-use designation change), but also the offensiveness of the change itself, i.e., respondents noting that a golf course does not "fit in" to the rural environment as they envision it (Hiner 2014, 2015, and forthcoming).

In essence, this particular land use sparked opposition based on the environmental ideologies and preferences of local stakeholders. One neighbor, a vehement opponent to the golf course, characterized her desire to live where she does, in a small-parcel subdivision, as a chance to enjoy natural amenities, including:

the small, the everyday wonders, the everyday miracles that sort of revive the spirits. I mean, gosh, you just walk around and listen to the birds. You watch the bunnies and you feel whole again, whatever else has been going on. Watch the grass come up and the wildflowers. I mean, it's a sense of renewal that you just can't get in a concrete jungle.

This respondent did not perceive the golf course next door as compatible with her version or vision of rural life. She blamed the owner for disrupting nature and destroying natural systems on the property, which had been an unused, open patch of land dominated by annual grasses and forbs. For her, the issue was about someone coming in from the city and ruining the nature—both literal and figurative—of her rural home as he disrupted the ecology of the property and created a draw for non-locals to swoop in and swoop out, causing congestion and increasing traffic and road hazards on roads she must travel every day.

3.5 Conclusion: The Significance of Contested Ecological Perspectives

Trinitas encapsulates the kind of contested ecologies that present themselves in exurbia. There are legal aspects to these contested ecologies and ethical–ecological elements that are not necessarily covered in law, but are the domain of popular struggle. As a Trinitas insider put it, "Logic never plays out in [resource conflicts] that get emotionally and politically charged." In other words, the more emotionally or politically charged an issue becomes, the less likely it is that rational, evidence-based thinking or logic will prevail.

Moreover, the Trinitas case in particular presents numerous environmental claims. I mean "claims" in the sense of ownership or "stake," but also in terms of physical and ecological features that are under debate such as: trees, streams (not just the water in them, but the shape and form of them and whether they have been altered), and plant or vegetation types. In addition, there are other more aesthetic and/or spiritual elements to the controversy. Roads (their adequacy and, presumably, the increased number of people driving on them) and signage have also been

cited as concerns. In the case of the roadside signs, the verbiage and claim is about whether they are *legal*, but the real issue is whether they are *acceptable*. Do large, commercial advertisements “fit” in the rural landscape? Who gets to decide? Clearly, aside from the physical material elements of the controversy, there is the larger issue over conception of place (Hiner *forthcoming*).

This case makes plain that residents in this exurban neighborhood have conflicting views of what the meaning and function of that place is. For example, the local opposition is characterized as activist and “NIMBY,” but the actors themselves would not characterize their activities that way. They see their involvement as legitimate and worthwhile community protection, not obstructionism (Lake 1993; Gibson 2005; Hiner and Galt 2011). Moreover, they speak of the solace and calm that they enjoy when seeing “the bunnies hop” and watching the wildflowers grow and are determined to ensure that disruptive activities do not destroy the habitat and environment necessary to enjoy that lifestyle amenity. Theirs is a particular perspective and it leads to a particular conception of the local ecology. This case and the actors involved in it demonstrate that differing perspectives can and do lead to *contested ecologies*.

The cases presented in this chapter demonstrate how different perspectives of the landscape and of the proper role of various social actors—landowners, governments, citizens—can produce very different outcomes. These varying perspectives can lead to actual conflicts in the community, such as fights over appropriate management strategies as demonstrated by the tremendous conflict and contestation over the Trinitas golf course. The sheer volume and variety of contestations emanating from Trinitas is what makes it such a key case in my study. However, it is most fascinating, though, when contrasted with Ironstone, a place that also could have been a site of contestation but has not been. In some cases the landowner prevails and carries through a drastic land-use change (such as in the case of Ironstone), and, in others, the issue becomes so contested that even one’s “victory” can taste bittersweet, such as the outcome with Trinitas. In the case of Trinitas, detractors ultimately got what they wanted, but were left with a de-moralized community and cultural landscape scarred by distrust.

In conclusion, land-use change along the rural–urban interface is significant both ecologically and socially as the outcomes shape both the physical landscape and the cultural one. Such land-use change is complicated further by taking place in an exurban context where the relationship between environment and society are in flux and are sometimes in dispute. As such, environmental management regimes in such places, which can be marked by divergent environmental imaginaries and ideologies, pervasive disagreement in terms of values, and differing preferences for environmental management strategies, need to be responsive to both the environmental and social changes taking place.

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