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Exploring Relational Dimensions of Rural Values and Character on Southern Vancouver Island, Canada

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Abstract

Southern Vancouver Island's coastal, rural-residential communities face acute, conflicting challenges relating to housing supply and affordability, loss of agricultural land, and environmental change. Here, grassroots organizations have formed around the ideas of preserving 'rural character' and maintaining 'rural values'; concerns that can be defended fiercely when change is proposed. We used mixed quantitative and qualitative methods to examine how Metchosin and North Saanich residents perceived "rural character" and "rural values." Our objective was to demonstrate the relational nature of place perception among and between residents of the same communities. Results revealed that perceptions of rural values and character vary widely among residents within the same community—often to conflicting degrees. This conflict demonstrates that residents' relational and situated interpretations of rural landscapes, and of rurality itself, can have implications for community governance and land use management.

Keywords: Rural character, rural values, place identity, land use governance, community conflict, counterurbanization, Vancouver Island

Exploration des dimensions relationnelles des valeurs et caractères ruraux dans le sud de l'île de Vancouver, au Canada

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Résumé

Les communautés résidentielles rurales côtières du sud de l'île de Vancouver sont confrontées à des défis aigus et contradictoires liés à l'offre et à l'accessibilité financière des logements, à la perte de terres agricoles et aux changements environnementaux. Dans ce contexte, des organisations communautaires se sont formées autour des notions de préservation du « caractère rural » et de maintien des « valeurs rurales », des préoccupations qui peuvent être défendues avec vigueur lorsque des changements sont proposés. Nous avons utilisé des méthodes mixtes, quantitatives et qualitatives, pour examiner comment les résidents de Metchosin et de North Saanich perçoivent le « caractère rural » et les « valeurs rurales ». Notre objectif était de démontrer la nature relationnelle de la perception du lieu au sein d'une même communauté et entre les résidents. Les résultats ont révélé que les perceptions des valeurs et du caractère rural varient considérablement d'un résident à l'autre au sein d'une même communauté, et souvent à des degrés contradictoires. Ce conflit démontre que les interprétations relationnelles et contextualisées que les habitants ont des paysages ruraux, et de la ruralité elle-même, peuvent avoir des répercussions sur la gouvernance communautaire et la gestion de l'aménagement du territoire.

Mots-clés : Caractère rural, valeurs rurales, identité du lieu, gouvernance de l'aménagement du territoire, conflit communautaire, contre-urbanisation, île de Vancouver

1.0 Introduction

Effective and equitable land use planning for rural-residential communities is challenging for municipalities (McGregor et al., 2006), particularly given rapid and uncertain climate changes. Unlike urban areas, planned suburbs, and fully rural areas, rural-residential communities are contested boundaries with edges blurred between the traditional city/country dichotomy (Simon, 2008). Two Southern Vancouver Island communities—Metchosin and North Saanich—are examples of such edge places (Ling & Dale, 2011). These municipalities are distinct but share some of the same tensions, including the demand for services and the desire to defend against urban encroachment from nearby Victoria. This tension is often articulated as “preserving rural values and character.” For municipal or regional planners trying to protect rural areas, it is often difficult to define rural character and residents' priorities (Heyer, 1990; Tilt et al., 2007). We hypothesized that preference for and definition of rural values and character is an emotionally loaded relational value (RV) that is both personal and contextual. We proposed that “rural values and character” is a variable notion that concerns not just the physical landscape features but also one's place attachment, perceptions of environmental change, identity, social status, economic circumstance, relationships, values, worldview, age, and gender. Our research question asked: how do residents' identity, place attachments, and demographic characteristics influence potentially contentious and varied personal definitions of rural values and character in two rural-residential communities on Southern Vancouver Island?

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 *Relational Paradigm and Relational Values*

In the human geography context, a relational paradigm is one in which researchers consider values, opinions, reactions and behaviours as contingent on the relationships, circumstances and environment within the system (Eyster et al., 2023; Stenseke, 2018; Donati, 2021). Relational thinking has been proposed to better understand complex problems, particularly situations involving individuals, societies and the environment (Walsh et al., 2020; Eyster et al., 2023; Chan et al., 2018). Contemporary urban and rural land use researchers have argued for a transdisciplinary planning approach given the myriad socioeconomic factors and growing urgency for responsible management of lands (Walsh et al., 2020; Baum, 2015; Ryan, 2002; Karmann et al., 2023). Relational thinking offers a lens to potentially explain why prescriptive approaches to planning based on research findings from other places—even if all conditions appear similar—are still met with opposition (Iversen et al., 2022; Lee, 2020).

Relational thinking means that a resident's values, desires, and responses to change are best understood when considered in relation to their surrounding system, including the physical environment (Stenseke, 2018; Chapman et al., 2018). This lens offers a way to understand how and why people's values, motives, and preferences may develop as well as how they may adapt (or change in priority) over time or in different circumstances (Stenseke, 2018). Evidence of relational values has been found within urban and rural planning literature. In one study of residents' definitions of rural character in New England, Ryan (2002) wrote “Perceptions of rural character may vary between different groups within the same community... [these perceptions] are often shaped by the changes that residents have observed in

their area” (Ryan, 2002, p. 20). Isis Brook (2018) described how the traditional use of the English Lake District for sheep farming over centuries became a story that bonded residents to preference for maintaining versus restoring the land. In their study from Maine, USA, Balukas et al. (2019) identified distinct classes of landowners by stewardship and conservation intentions associated with the physical geography of their properties; this relationship between personal values and land characteristics appeared to influence their willingness to subdivide or sell. In their study of settlement patterns in the Greater Amsterdam area, Boterman et al. (2018) found that people belonging to the creative class were overrepresented in the pre-war urban core regardless of their income, suggesting that occupation relates to preference for a specific landscape or milieu.

2.2 Place Attachment and Place Identity

Place attachment has been described as an emotional bond between a person and their surrounding environment, whether that landscape be natural or constructed (Anton & Lawrence, 2016; Brown & Raymond, 2007). When understood as a confluence of elements—emotional, social, geographic—the concept of place attachment is naturally compatible with a relational thinking framework. In land use planning, place attachment is a factor that can impede change (Lalicic & Garaus, 2022), because changing the landscape has the potential to alter or erode people's relationships with their special places. Because places may hold radically different meanings to people, those ascribed meanings influence not just how people feel about the place but also how they may react to a change (Manzo & Perkins, 2006; Rajala et al., 2020; Lai & Kreuter, 2012). Higher levels of place attachment tend to increase the likelihood of opposing place change (Lalicic & Garaus, 2022; Anton & Lawrence, 2016).

People's sense of identity forms over time within the context of where they live, who else lives there, and what is happening in the world around them (Rajala et al., 2020; Santo-Tomas Muro et al., 2020; Mook et al., 2022). The “sense-of-self-in-place” concept also impacts the political landscape of decision-making, which holds relevance to conflicts involving outside influence in the planning process (Cantrill & Senecah, 2001; Bieling, 2013). Rajala et al. (2020) attribute the lack of sufficient understanding of sense of place as a key contributor to conflict, lack of collaboration and misunderstanding around the varied responses to change. How we feel about a place—and how a place shapes how we feel about ourselves—may also influence whether we respond to change with openness, or opposition, or apathy (Jean, 2016; Anton & Lawrence, 2016; Upham et al., 2018).

2.3 Emotions, Values and Worldview

Researchers have shown that human values, emotions, and desires significantly influence how land is used, for better or worse (Walker & Ryan, 2008; Drescher et al., 2017; Gobster et al., 2022). Individual and group emotions are also rarely homogenous, which is evident when conflict arises over appropriate land use decisions. Unlike emotions, which can be inaccessible or difficult to pinpoint, values tend to be more consciously accessible; measuring values can be a way to understand people's emotions towards a preferred place or landscape, and provide critical context when change is opposed. Understanding values can be especially helpful in situations where people may do or say something similar but motivated by different reasons (Chapman et al., 2019).

2.4 Social Influences, Class and Landscape Character

Socioeconomic class and other demographic dimensions also have an influence on personal values and beliefs; specifically, how those beliefs and values might contribute to a particular definition of what it means to preserve something like rural values and character (Cloke & Thrift, 1987; Halfacree, 2018). In previous studies, economic status, social class, gender, and power dynamics have been shown to influence how people feel about landscape and landscape change (Drescher et al., 2017; Lalicic & Garaus, 2022). Contemporary scholarship in community psychology brings a particular focus to the role of race and class in power dynamics, especially relating to social capital (Ntontis et al., 2020). This has direct implications for community planning, particularly when the typical structure of engagement and decision-making upholds or reinforces systemic inequity (Dutta, 2018). Regarding rural development specifically, researchers have revealed some supporting evidence of power dynamics at play in the community planning context. Studies in the English (UK) countryside revealed enclaves of ‘rural elites’ who successfully leveraged sustainability arguments to oppose densification in the face of government-imposed housing mandates (Cloke & Thrift, 1987; Sturzaker, 2010).

3.0 Methods

3.1 Study Areas

The municipalities of Metchosin and North Saanich (Study Areas 1 and 2, respectively) are located on Southern Vancouver Island, with Metchosin situated on the southwest coast, and North Saanich on a peninsula on the southeast side of the island (see Figure 1). Both communities have their own municipal government, infrastructure, elementary schools, and small community hubs offering basic services. Larger towns and cities (such as Victoria) are located within easy driving distance of both communities.

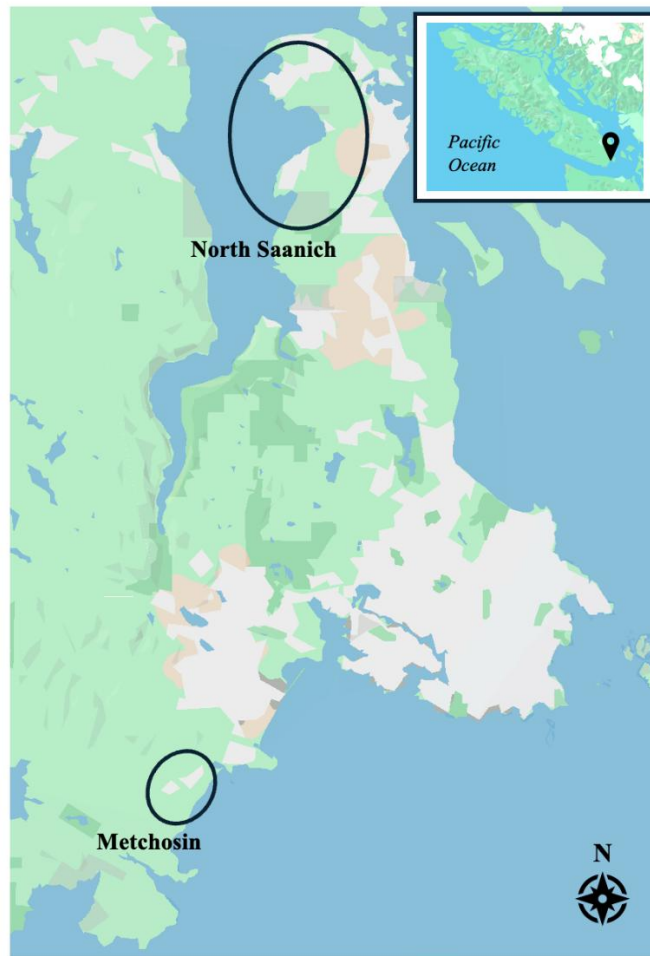
Both Metchosin and North Saanich evolved as farming settlements populated by European immigrants in the late 1880s (Metchosin Museum Society, 2024). Over 150 years, both municipalities have evolved into rural-residential communities that now include estate acreages within the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), modern beachfront homes, and some commercial-scale farms. North Saanich, the larger of the two municipalities, also contains several planned subdivisions and the island’s major transportation services (North Saanich, n.d.). In terms of formal designations, North Saanich’s rural status is nuanced; it falls within the Victoria Census Metropolitan Area (CMA), but with a population density of 329.2 persons per square kilometre, the district meets the classification for rural under the Statistics Canada Population Centre and Rural Area Classification (Statistics Canada, 2017).

In 2023, the British Columbia (BC) Government introduced new legislation to address the provincewide housing shortage. This legislation included minimum targets for new housing units across 47 municipalities, including North Saanich, which must create 419 units over five years (Housing Supply Act, Province of BC, 2022).

Both communities are also grappling with climate change realities. Annual temperatures are projected to rise an additional 1.6-3.6 degrees Celsius by 2050, increasing the number of frost-free days by up to two months. Annual summer droughts are the new normal in this once predictably rainy Pacific Northwest, with summer precipitation projected to decrease (Pacific Climate Impacts Consortium,

2023). Meanwhile, autumn precipitation events have intensified, leading to flooding, erosion, and weakened or dying trees coming down on powerlines and buildings (Capital Regional District, 2021). Sea levels around Vancouver Island are expected to rise 0.5 metres by 2050 and 1.2 metres by 2100 (IPCC, 2012), simultaneously threatening infrastructure, public beaches, and private property. These growing climate-related issues add further complexity to concerns over land use policy within both study areas.

Figure 1: Study areas 1 and 2.



Note. Map data © Google 2025.

3.2 Methodology

The complex relationships within human geographies require a relational thinking lens and a research design that contains a hybrid of successful, pre-existing methods (Walsh et al., 2020; Baum, 2015; Ryan, 2002; Karmann et al, 2023). From this conceptual and methodological position, we selected methods that were well-tested and seemingly best suited to help us achieve the research objectives. We selected the two study areas for comparative analysis to observe similarities given many shared issues, but also to explore differences and distinctions among and between the two communities.

We used surveys to generate quantitative data and supplemented that data with qualitative methods to capture emotion-laden nuance and allow for the possibility of unanticipated insights, relationships, or research opportunities. Based on research in the scholarly literature, we shortlisted some possible factors that may relate to individuals' perceptions and descriptions of rural values and character (Stenseke, 2018; Chapman et al., 2019). Our research design positioned participants' definitions of 'rural values and character' as the RV; our hypothesis was that definitions of rural values and character will vary, potentially revealing friction points for planning and community character disagreements.

Ethics approval was granted by the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board in April, 2024. Our research design included a standard demographic questionnaire to target potential relational factors, as well as two original survey questions. We included a question in the survey that asked participants where they resided before age 18, after noting from the literature how early life experience can shape current place perception (Tuan, 2001). Tenure in the community was captured separately, in a question that asked how many years the participant had been living in the study area. This did result in examples where long-term residents who spent their childhoods living elsewhere were classified as non-local, acknowledging that the operational definition of "non-local" in this study refers specifically to childhood residence, and may not reflect how individual participants self-identify in terms of community belonging. The first original question was a list of nine phrases relating to rural values and character that participants were asked to arrange in order of significance from most important to least important (see Table 1). This question was designed to test how perceptions and priorities of rural values and characteristics differed among participants and to understand whether there were characteristics with stronger consensus that could be helpful for community planning.

The nine phrases we provided were inspired by Ryan's (2002) study, in which he measured residents' perception of landscape aesthetics as related to personal definitions of rural character.

Table 1. *Nine Phrases for Participants to Arrange in Order of Significance*

Natural, wild areas	Sense of peace	Views of farms, farm animals, fields
Feeling safe	Like-minded neighbours	Low density, few subdivisions
A sentimental or nostalgic feeling	A connected community	A rustic, no-frills lifestyle

For the second question, participants were given an optional prompt to respond to: "Please describe any additional thoughts, feelings, or beliefs you consider important to the concept of rural values and character." This allowed participants to provide comments or perspectives that would not have been captured by the survey questions; because the literature indicated that individual perceptions and beliefs could be manifold (Lewis, 2008; Iversen et al., 2022), this open-ended question added a critical dimension to our research design.

3.3 Participant Recruitment and Profile

Our initial goal was to recruit 200 participants, all residents from Study Areas 1 and 2. We chose this target based on sample sizes from other studies involving similar topics and research designs (Anton & Lawrence, 2016; Walker & Ryan, 2008; Lai & Kreuter, 2012; Cheung & Hui, 2018). We wanted to hear from homeowners and renters, newcomers to the region as well as long-time residents, residents with young children and residents who are retired, etc. This would not be guaranteed through a random sampling approach; therefore, we aimed to recruit participants purposively to ensure responses covered a sufficiently broad demographic range. This was challenging, particularly when it came to recruiting renters and younger adults in the ages 18–24 range. Recruitment was undertaken through:

- Messages on the Metchosin Residents (2.2k members) & North Saanich Residents (3.1k members) Facebook Groups and North Saanich Nextdoor app
- Research recruitment posters (with a QR code to scan for online survey) at local gathering places
- Snowball strategy: willing participants were asked to suggest/recruit others from the community

We collected as many surveys as possible and made the decision to weigh responses based on demographics if needed.

4.0 Results

Of the 213 people who started the survey, 116 completed it, reflecting a 54.5% completion rate. Of the 116 participants, 42 were male, 74 were female, and none identified as non-binary. Most participants fell between the ages of 35–74, with only 1.7% in the 18–24 group, 7.8% in the 25–34 group, and 12.9% in the 75–84 group. The proportion of participants living in Metchosin was 25% (Study Area 1), and 75% in North Saanich (Study Area 2), reflecting a disproportionate number of responses from Study Area 2 compared to respective populations. Most participants (98, or 84.5%) said they owned their home, and the remaining 18 (15.5%) were renters. Table A1 shows full demographic results.

Table A1. *Participant Survey Data*

Location	N	%
Study Area 1 (Metchosin)	29	25.0
Study Area 2 (North Saanich)	87	75.0
Participants' Gender		
Male	42	36.2
Female	74	63.8
Participants' Age Range		
18–24	2	1.7
25–34	9	7.8
35–44	30	25.9
45–54	17	14.7

Table A1 continued		
55–64	18	15.5
65–74	25	21.6
75–84	15	12.9
85+	0	0
Participants who were raised on Southern Vancouver Island		
Yes	53	45.7
No	63	54.3
Number of years Participants have lived in Study Area		
≤5	21	18.1
6–10	30	25.9
11–20	15	12.9
21–30	16	13.8
31–65	34	29.3
Participants' employment status		
Employed	47	40.5
Retire	41	35.3
Self-employed	22	19.0
Stay-at-home parent	2	1.7
Student	2	1.7
Unemployed	2	1.7
Participants who had farming as their Primary Income		
Overall	4	3.4
Study Area 1	2	6.7
Study Area 2	2	2.3
Participants with children in their family		
Yes	84	72.4
No	32	27.6
Participants who have children currently living at home		
Yes	42	50.0
No	42	50.0
Participants' home ownership status		
Own	98	84.5
Rent	18	15.5
Owned Property in Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR)		
Overall	14	12
Study Area 1	6	20.7
Study Area 2	8	9.2
Owned Property Farm Classification		
Overall	N	%
Overall	10	8.6
In Study Area 1	6	20.7

Table A1 continued

In Study Area 2	4	4.6
Owned Home Value (\$ in millions)	Median	Mean
Overall	1.50	2.01
Study Area 1	1.22	1.29
Study Area 2	1.50	2.21

Note. Selected variables were disaggregated by study area where meaningful differences were expected based on the communities' land use profiles, e.g. ALR land, farm classification, farming as primary income.

4.1 Quantitative Results

Participants arranged the nine phrases in order of significance to their rural values and character definition. Of the 116 lists, only two were identical, an early confirmation that rural values and character are both subjective and relational. We began by calculating the percentage of times a phrase appeared in each given ranking position to identify which phrases had greater agreement across the entire participant group. Table A2 presents phrase ranking data.

Table A2. Ranked Responses—All Participants

Phrase	%								
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th
Low density/few subdivisions	9.48	12.07	14.66	9.48	7.76	6.9	14.66	14.66	10.34
Sense of peace	10.34	14.66	22.41	17.24	13.79	5.17	6.9	6.9	2.59
A rustic no-frills lifestyle	6.9	3.45	6.9	8.62	5.17	11.21	13.79	29.31	14.66
Feeling safe	18.1	16.38	12.07	12.07	16.38	12.07	6.9	4.31	1.72
Sentimental or nostalgic feeling	0.86	3.45	2.59	1.72	4.31	3.45	7.76	19.83	56.03
Natural wild areas	29.31	18.97	11.21	10.34	14.66	9.48	1.72	3.45	0.86
Views of farms/farm animals/fields	10.34	12.93	6.9	21.55	14.66	11.21	12.07	4.31	6.03
Like-minded neighbours	1.72	5.17	9.48	11.21	8.62	22.41	25	11.21	5.17
A connected community	12.93	12.93	13.79	7.76	14.66	18.1	11.21	6.03	2.59

Note: Column headers represent response position (first, second, etc.). Shading indicates the phrase that appeared most frequently in the given position.

Natural, wild areas appeared the most in the number one ranking place (29.31%), indicating preference among participants that this aesthetic feature is a core component of rural values and character. *Natural, wild areas* also scored highly in the second and third positions. *Views of farms, farm animals, fields* appeared most often in the fourth or fifth position, which contrasts with some associations of rurality as traditional agricultural landscapes (Ryan, 2002). Aside from *Natural, wild areas*, the other phrases with the highest average rankings were emotional and social features, including *Sense of peace*, *Feeling safe*, and *A connected community*. *Low density/few subdivisions* appeared most often in third, seventh and eighth position.

We calculated the three most important phrases across dimensions of gender, hometown, employment status, and study area based on the percent incidence of a phrase appearing in the given ranking position (see Tables A3-6).

Table A3. *Ranked Responses by Gender*

Phrase	Males %			Females %		
	1st	2nd	3rd	1st	2nd	3rd
Low density/few subdivisions	2.4	7.1	11.9	13.5	14.9	16.2
Sense of peace	7.1	19.0	21.4	12.2	12.2	23.0
A rustic no-frills lifestyle	7.1	7.1	11.9	6.8	1.4	8.1
Feeling safe	28.6	9.5	9.5	12.2	20.3	13.5
Sentimental or nostalgic feeling	0.0	7.1	0.0	1.4	1.4	4.1
Natural wild areas	28.6	16.7	16.7	29.7	20.3	8.1
Views of farms/farm animals/ fields	9.5	9.5	7.1	10.8	14.9	6.8
Like-minded neighbours	2.4	7.1	11.9	1.4	4.1	8.1
A connected community	14.3	16.7	16.7	12.2	10.8	12.2

Note. Shading indicates the phrase that appeared most frequently in the given position.

Subtle differences in perception between male and female participants were noted (see Table A3). Males ranked certain social/emotional phrases higher than females, including *Feeling safe*, *A connected community*, and *Like-minded neighbours*. Males ranked *Feeling safe* in the first position 28.6% of the time, while females ranked it in first position 12.2% of the time. *A connected community* appeared in males' top three 47.7% of the time, but only 35.2% among females. *Like-minded neighbours* appeared in men's top three 21.4% of the time, versus 13.6% for females. Females were twice as likely as males to place *Low density, few subdivisions* in their top three (44.6% vs 21.4%), and five times more likely to rank it in the number one spot. Overall, physical characteristics (*Natural, wild areas*, *Low density/few subdivisions*,

Views of farms) were in the number one position 54% of the time for females versus 40.5% for males.

Table A4. *Ranked Responses by Hometown*

Phrase	Local %			Non-Local %		
	1st	2nd	3rd	1st	2nd	3rd
Low density/few subdivisions	7.3	9.1	16.4	11.5	14.8	13.1
Sense of peace	10.9	7.3	27.3	9.8	21.3	18.0
A rustic no-frills lifestyle	9.1	5.5	7.3	4.9	1.6	6.6
Feeling safe	21.8	25.5	10.9	14.8	8.2	13.1
Sentimental or nostalgic feeling	1.8	3.6	3.6	0.0	3.3	1.6
Natural wild areas	21.8	14.5	9.1	36.1	23.0	13.1
Views of farms/ farm animals/ fields	10.9	16.4	3.6	9.8	9.8	9.8
Like-minded neighbours	1.8	5.5	12.7	1.6	4.9	6.6
A connected community	14.5	12.7	9.1	11.5	13.1	18.0

Note. Shading indicates the phrase that appeared most frequently in the given position.

We calculated the top three values statement rankings according to participants' residence in early life (see Table A4). This data was taken from the survey question: *Where did you grow up before the age of 18?* Fifty-five participants grew up on southern Vancouver Island, while 61 grew up elsewhere. The most notable differences between the phrase rankings were the positions of *Natural, wild areas* and *Feeling safe*. *Natural, wild areas* appeared in the top three among 72.2% of the non-local participants, versus 45.4% of local participants. *Feeling safe* appeared in the top three 58.2% of the time for the local group, versus 36.1% for the non-local group. Other contrasts, such as the prevalence of *Sentimental or nostalgic feeling* in the top three (9% for local; 4.9% for non-local), were subtle but could be significant if tested with a larger sample.

We analysed the values rankings according to employment status (see Table A5). For this calculation, two participants who were unemployed and the one student participant were excluded. We classified the remaining 113 participants into either a working (employed, self-employed, or stay-at-home parents) or retired groups, then calculated the top three phrases (%) for each group (see Table A6). Some differences between the two groups were noted, particularly the ranking of a rustic, no-frills lifestyle, which appeared in a top three position among 24% of the working group, versus 4.8% of the retired group, and sentimental or nostalgic feeling (Working: 4.2%; Retired: 9.7%). *Feeling safe* also ranked somewhat higher for the working group (in the top three: 50.6% vs 39.1%).

Table A5. *Ranked Responses by Employment Status*

Phrase	Working %			Retired %		
	1st	2nd	3rd	1st	2nd	3rd
Low density/few subdivisions	9.9	12.7	16.9	9.8	9.8	12.2
Sense of peace	8.5	11.3	25.4	12.2	22.0	19.5
A rustic no-frills lifestyle	9.9	4.2	9.9	0.0	2.4	2.4
Feeling safe	23.9	19.7	7.0	9.8	12.2	17.1
Sentimental or nostalgic feeling	0.0	2.8	1.4	2.4	4.9	2.4
Natural wild areas	25.4	19.7	12.7	36.6	19.5	9.8
Views of farms/ farm animals/ fields	5.6	12.7	7.0	17.1	12.2	4.9
Like-minded neighbours	1.4	4.2	11.3	2.4	7.3	7.3
A connected community	15.5	12.7	8.5	9.8	9.8	24.4

Note: Shading indicates the phrase that appeared most frequently in the given position.

Table A6. *Ranked Responses by Study Area*

Phrase	Metchosis %			North Saanich %		
	1st	2nd	3rd	1st	2nd	3rd
Low density/few subdivisions	17.2	10.3	13.8	6.9	12.6	14.9
Sense of peace	3.4	13.8	31.0	12.6	14.9	19.5
A rustic no-frills lifestyle	13.8	3.4	6.9	4.6	3.4	6.9
Feeling safe	10.3	6.9	17.2	20.7	19.5	10.3
Sentimental or nostalgic feeling	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.1	4.6	3.4
Natural wild areas	31.0	27.6	13.8	28.7	16.1	10.3
Views of farms/farm animals/ fields	6.9	10.3	6.9	11.5	13.8	6.9
Like-minded neighbours	3.4	3.4	6.9	1.1	5.7	10.3
A connected community	13.8	24.1	3.4	12.6	9.2	17.2

Note: Shading indicates the phrase that appeared most frequently in the given position.

We repeated the same steps for the top three rankings segmented by Study Area to compare residents' perceptions and preferences in Metchosin and North Saanich (see Table A6). Most Metchosin residents (72.4%) displayed a strong association with *Natural, wild areas*, ranking it in first, second or third position, versus in North Saanich where it appeared in the top three 55.1% of the time. Other phrases with higher contrast between Study Areas included *A rustic, no-frills lifestyle* (Metchosin: 24.1%; North Saanich: 14.9%), *Feeling safe* (Metchosin: 35%; North Saanich: 50.5%), and *A sentimental or nostalgic feeling* (Metchosin: 0%; North Saanich: 9.1%).

4.2 Qualitative Results

Seventy-one of the 116 participants responded to the optional qualitative survey task. A unique pseudonym was assigned to each participant. The 71 written comments were diverse in both form and perspective. Some participants elaborated on their survey answers or the nine phrases: “Wide open spaces, fewer people, agriculture...”; “Salt of the earth people...”; “Respect for others...”; “Limited government interference...” While some of the long-form responses offered perceptions of rurality without further elaboration, many veered into concerns or defences for change—both current and anticipated. Participants’ written submissions revealed deep care for their neighbourhood or community. Conflicting appraisals of both present conditions and future visions suggested varied relationships to place and emotional responses, consistent with the literature (Gobster et al., 2022; Karmann et al., 2023). Responses were organized thematically into three areas: (1) relational perceptions of rurality; (2) counterurbanization and cultural change; and (3) values tensions.

4.2.1 Relational Perceptions of Rurality in North Saanich. One of the participants from North Saanich wrote, “One only has to live in the city for 30 years to feel the reduction of stress when shifting to a rural community. It really is a gift to live this way” (Vera).

In North Saanich, participants expressed diverging perspectives on whether their community or neighbourhood could be considered rural. Some descriptions of rurality contradicted others, such as Florence, who described North Saanich as “NOT rural...[it is] an area of privilege,” while Hannah said, “We moved here for more space and the rural, farm-like setting.” Three participants qualified their perspectives by comparing the place where they grew up with their study area and using that rationale to defend or challenge the ‘rural’ label, including Lydia, who said, “I grew up rural, no neighbours, no stores, nothing around unless you drove an hour to find it...” Four North Saanich participants defined rurality vis-a-vis an agricultural landscape with farming activities, for example, “Rural areas are characterized by large acreages which are primarily used for growing food crops, vines, even hay...” (Brad, North Saanich); and “Rural means large swaths of farmland...” (Iris, North Saanich). Such descriptions contrast with the lower average rank of *Views of farms, farm animals, fields* in the nine phrases across the total sample; this inconsistency suggests one example of misalignment among residents about what constitutes a rural landscape.

4.2.2. *Counter-urbanisation & Cultural Changes*. Daniel from Metchosin mentioned:

Modern rural values are creating exclusion by imposing nonsensical standards of maintenance. It is becoming a luxury of the rich to live in a rural community, and not a way of life for the common man. As a full-time farmer, I find myself priced out of being able to own land. Thus restricted in my job of growing food.

In participants' longform responses, perceptions of rurality existed relative to geographical context and history, evolving as local migration trends and broader societal shift, as noted in other literature (Boterman et al., 2018). Six out of 71 participants expressed happiness and satisfaction with their community: "It really is a gift to live this way..." (Vera, North Saanich); "I know I am blessed to have what we have..." (Aisha, North Saanich); "Rural life is very nice..." (Cedric, Metchosin), while 12 participants (n=71) used the open-ended question to raise concerns about perceived cultural changes taking place in their community. Bea (North Saanich) wrote"

Family has resided in this area since 1912. It was always considered a working class area and rural meant something different than today. It's now a landing place for wealthy retirees and very rich people who are impressed they live here and have an outdated desire to maintain a rural life. It's fine if you want a place for your "horse" farm.

Though no responses used the word counterurbanisation, two participants (n=71) mentioned gentrification: "Gentrification or the moving-in of affluent residents is completely changing the character of our area..." (Ivan, North Saanich); "The problem with this area is gentrification and the big money that has moved in..." (Veronica, North Saanich).

Eight participants across both study areas (n=71) raised direct concerns about the socioeconomic changes occurring in the communities. Participants also expressed explicit frustration toward newcomers, questioning their values and lifestyle choices: "People tend to think they have achieved something special by building a \$2 million [dollar] mansion" (Veronica, North Saanich), and "[Horses] are just a hobby, like riding dirt bikes. They are not true agricultural" (Greg, North Saanich), while others expressed sadness about their perceived erosion of rural character attributed to "development" or "urbanization" without linking the erosion to a specific group of people.

Though socioeconomic class was not mentioned in the nine values phrases, for some participants, rurality was associated with affluence—echoing findings from existing research (Michels, 2017). Benjamin (North Saanich) wrote, "We cannot be an exclusive wealthy community of big houses or agriculture," while Bea described North Saanich as "a landing place for wealthy retirees and very rich people who are impressed they live here and have an outdated desire to maintain a rural life." Veronica presented an argument about the environmental impact of "rich" residents, saying:

We are probably the community exerting the biggest environmental pressures in the region - the rich people building and living in the mansions are the biggest over-consumers...effectively destroying our environment all day long every day. Over the past 47 years, I have watched this region become a travesty of 'rural landscapes.'

Participants expressed concern that rural values and character may be co-opted by elites to keep such places for themselves, such as Esme (Metchosin), who said "I think rural has become a code for gatekeeping – acting as though others don't belong or deserve to be here..." One participant suggested that the housing crisis was being used as an excuse to advance development, saying, "Lack of affordable housing is being used disingenuously to push unsustainable development..." (Quentin, North Saanich); another participant said, "Development is the most threatening change to rural areas" (Olivia, North Saanich). More research can, and should, be done on counter-urbanization, socioeconomic differentiation, and land use in these communities to better understand the underlying factors driving these perceptions.

4.2.3. *Values Tensions.* Kathryn from North Saanich added:

To maintain rural character, it is vital that residents understand that they live within an ecosystem...and live in ways that protect, steward and enhance it...

I want to be able to feel connected to my community, to authentically relate."

Participants' written submissions implied that housing, rural character, and environmental conservation priorities are in conflict for what matters most and to whom. This was evident by the amount of thematic overlap within the comments, where 15 of the 71 statements explicitly or implicitly acknowledged all three issues; yet most participants appeared to have one 'bottom-line' issue that was prioritized. In one response, Juliana (North Saanich) offered general thoughts on rural values, writing "Rural communities are valuable for human mental and physical health... Preserving precious rural areas should be prioritized by governments", while emphasizing specific concerns about changes to zoning bylaws. She wrote:

Once a community is fully zoned, or each residential area is fully zoned, it is wrong for Government to come along in subsequent years and further subdivide, rezone or split up mature developed residential areas. The biggest expense in a persons life is buying their home. The purchase of a home and property is based on a lifestyle choice. To impose a new and unwanted lifestyle on residents after they have invested in their home and property for many years is simply wrong and unethical.

Other participants suggested different priorities, such as Oskar (North Saanich), "If there are those living without food, shelter, health and safety in or near our communities we are all responsible"; Ron (North Saanich) "I wish for incentives to grow food and forest, incentives to reduce invasive species spread, and a gradual tax increase for all activities that do not help the ecosystems thrive"; and Bethany

(Metchosin), “Once land has been built on or paved over, it is almost impossible to return it back to nature. Without farming communities, we have no food. Without forests we have limited oxygen and diminished wildlife.” Sue (Metchosin) centered the housing crisis in her response, while suggesting that it was possible to address the issue without degrading nature:

I think all people deserve to experience the tranquility of living in a place that has enough space and an abundance of nature... We must stop thinking that the way things have always been done are the only way things can be done. It's time to implement housing solutions that do not destroy nature, the very thing we need that makes life on earth worth living and even makes it possible.

Participants varied in their approach to answering the open-ended question, particularly with the responses that addressed values tensions or conflicts. Responses included emotional statements (“heartbreaking”, “disappointed”, “sad”) as well as reasoned arguments: “Adding density in North Saanich will increase energy requirements for transportation” (Steve, North Saanich); “Not every municipality needs to provide every housing type” (Ines, North Saanich). With 84.5% of participants homeowners (at a mean value of \$2M), we hoped to generate more responses from renters to explore any perception variability, but the small renters sample wouldn't allow for reliable statistical analyses.

However, there were some insights in the written responses that indicated a contrast between the renters' and owners' priorities. Qualitative data was provided by 10 of the 18 renters (55%): of those 10 submissions, five (50%) specifically mentioned housing affordability challenges. This is notable, as housing affordability was not a prominent theme in the balance of the qualitative data, and the open-ended prompt: *Please describe any additional thoughts, feelings, or beliefs you consider important to the concept of rural values and character* did not explicitly address that topic. Of the 15 comments among owners that related to housing or densification, 11 of them took an explicit or implicit negative position, while five owners expressed support for more housing, commenting: “willing to have more density” (Devon, North Saanich); “I enjoy the rural but recognize a younger generation is needed to support the workforce of North Saanich...many drive in from Langford and that is not helping the environment” (Yvonne, North Saanich); “I think we can densify some to help provide homes for people” (Esme, Metchosin). Aisha, a North Saanich homeowner, acknowledged that her children will not be able to afford to own a home, and said: “I hope the next generation will be brave enough to find small BC towns where things are less expensive and build those communities.”

5.0 Discussion

Quantitative and qualitative results included participants' many perspectives and perceptions, even when adjusting for age, gender, socioeconomic status, and life stage. Throughout these findings, we demonstrated that in Metchosin and North Saanich there is no cohesive definition of ‘rural values and character’, although *Natural*, *wild areas* and *A sense of peace* were two phrases that showed relative consensus. Concern, anger, and sadness due to evolving socioeconomic changes to the local environment suggest counter-urbanization is a disruptive force in both

study areas, as indicated in literature from other regions of the world (Gkartzios & Halfacree, 2023; Kneipp et al., 2026). These issues arose unprompted through the qualitative data, where participants who had lived in their study area for many years shared personal reflections about “the way things used to be” and ruminated about unwelcome change.

In most cases, both Metchosin and North Saanich residents expressed deep commitment to, and care for, their neighbourhood and community—regardless of how long they have lived there. Participants differed in their respective definitions of rural values and character—which seem to be at least partially influenced by their gender, age, employment status, and hometown. Longform responses revealed local tensions and values conflicts between housing supply, the preservation of agricultural areas, and environmental concerns—issues with profound implications for southern Vancouver Island, the broader region and beyond.

5.1 ‘Rural Values and Character’ as Relational Values

Consistent with the literature—and within the context of varied results surrounding participant values, worldview, and place attachment—participants’ perception of rural values and character showed a spectrum of preference and relative significance (Tilt et al., 2007; Walker & Ryan, 2008). Findings from the nine values phrase rankings and the qualitative data confirmed our hypothesis that residents’ perceptions of rural values and character are relational (Eyster et al., 2023; Chan et al., 2018; Halfacree, 1995; Walker & Ryan, 2008). This was demonstrated through the segmentation of preferred phrases by demographic dimensions including age, gender, hometown, employment status, and study area.

The unique rankings of the nine phrases by 114 of the 116 participants, and lack of consensus among the top-scoring phrases on average (further enriched by varied and conflicting qualitative responses) demonstrate how subjective the idea of “character” can be (Chapman et al., 2019; Halfacree, 1995; Walker & Ryan, 2008). This has implications for community planning and engagement processes, particularly when change is opposed or questioned by groups of people concerned about so-called rural values and character (Gobster et al., 2022; Halfacree, 2017). Results indicated that though some features were more commonly associated with rural values and character, such as *Natural*, *wild areas*, *Feeling safe*, *Sense of peace* and *A connected community*, individual definitions and priorities varied—echoing similar findings in the literature (Chapman et al., 2019; Ryan, 2002).

Factors like gender and place of origin were related to definitions of rural values and character, with women placing more emphasis on aesthetic features (like lower density) and men ranking socio-emotional characteristics higher (e.g., feeling safe). It is crucial to note that average rankings of phrases do not capture the nuance of individual responses; for example, 11 participants placed *Low density*, *few subdivisions* as the *most* important factor in their definition of rural values and character, while 12 placed it as the factor of *least* importance. This caveat matters when planning and accommodating the potential spectrum of responses to a proposed land use change, even when everyone assumes they are working towards the same goal (Sonn & Stevens, 2021).

The possibility that someone’s hometown or early living experience relates to their current perceptions of place (Tuan, 2001) was tested in our analysis of the nine phrases. We noted differences between the local and non-local groups, findings

reinforced by qualitative responses from four participants who explained why North Saanich is not rural relative to a place where they lived before. Locally raised participants were significantly more likely to strongly associate *Feeling safe* with rural values and character, while participants raised elsewhere placed greater emphasis on *Natural, wild areas*. This finding suggests that the feeling of safety in place may be relational to one's perception of rural values and character as well as one's hometown or community of origin; further supporting the idea that place perception is relative to both the individual and their experience (Tuan, 2001; Stenseke, 2018; Chapman et al., 2019).

5.2 Class, Culture and Circumstance as Perceptual Factors

Disagreement on what constitutes a rural area, whether the study area qualifies as rural, and what features should be prioritized figure prominently among participants from North Saanich. Property values among homeowner participants in this study averaged \$2.2 million, far exceeding average prices for the Greater Victoria region. Participants expressed different perspectives on housing supply and affordability. The contrast appeared to be strongest between owners and renters; in the long-form responses, half of the renters mentioned housing affordability as an aspect of rural values, while of the owners who addressed housing in their responses, two-thirds argued that housing and/or densification was a threat to rural values and character. These conflicts suggest that the perceived importance of density in the characterization of rurality varies widely among participants, particularly owners versus renters, and may relate to their personal circumstances (Halfacree, 1995; Cloke & Thrift, 1987; Sturzaker, 2010).

5.3 Implications for Community Planning

Proof of shifting, relational definitions of rural values and character revealed friction between long-time residents who mused about the way things were, versus newcomers searching for peace or other features, and perhaps caring less about the traditional landscape aesthetic (Stenseke, 2018). These issues were illustrated in the qualitative data, where residents contended with values conflicts about environmental protection, the need for housing per the provincial target order, and how these issues shape land use change.

Our data assessment revealed both challenges and opportunities within land use planning and community engagement. Findings from the nine values ranking analysis indicated that though there were some consistent patterns among and between demographic groups, individual perceptions of rural values and character still varied, sometimes starkly. Such contradictions could be due to perspectives of experience, the participant's specific neighbourhood, or whether rural character is defined in physical, emotional, or social ways (Halfacree, 1995). The potential for conflict is illustrated in examples where features like *Views of farms, farm animals and fields* come first on one person's definition and last on another's. It is certainly easy to understand how a strong association with farming (and all its sights, sounds, and smells) could conflict with a strong preference for peacefulness. Such misalignments are clearly problematic, but do not necessarily doom planning strategy to fail.

One possible solution to conflicting perceptions of character could be to identify features with broader consensus (like natural, wild areas) and use those as guiding principles, with more contentious characteristics (like density and subdivisions)

considered by the degree to which they can/cannot align with the guiding principles. If housing supply is a regional priority, but residents are divided on their sensitivity to densification as a threat to rural values and character, is there a way to accommodate additional housing units without eroding natural, wild areas and peacefulness? Goodwill could be encouraged when residents have opportunities to discover where their values and principles overlap, rather than focusing solely on differences.

6.0 Conclusion

The competing issues of housing needs, agricultural preservation, climate change, and environmental management have placed southern Vancouver Island's rural-residential communities under immense pressure. Governments, municipalities, and planning departments need knowledge and tools to address conflicts and find solutions that will allow communities to grow and thrive. Our research goal was to reveal insights on the varied meanings of rural values and character, to better articulate differences of opinion, and identify opportunities for agreement. Our results support scholarly findings that perceptions of place involve a combination of physical, emotional and social dimensions (Tuan, 1974; Du Bray et al., 2019). Individual perceptions of rural values and character are subject to factors including (but probably not limited to) age, gender, hometown, study area, employment status, and possibly homeowner vs renter status.

In the land use planning context, relational values such as the oft-touted 'rural character' are best understood as a confluence of subjective perceptions rather than a state that can be objectively defined (Halfacree, 2017; Walker & Ryan, 2008). In a relational paradigm, there is interdependence between people, societies, and their environment, which means that any entity within the system shall be defined relative to an individual's experience within it (Walsh et al., 2020). This is like the synthesis of worldview according to Tuan's definition of "conceptualized experience" (2001). From this perspective, and as demonstrated in this research, rural values and character are an example of a relational value: they are mutable and mean something different to everyone (Chan et al., 2018).

Understanding the hierarchy of features that form an individual's definition of rural values and character can help communities navigate land use policy change and public engagement. Asking residents to arrange community character features by significance is a mechanism to articulate both how commonly valued features and attributes may be enhanced, while more contentious features can be considered within a context of partial consensus (for example, adapting zoning policy to enable more housing units without adding to the building footprint).

The relational nature of people-place relationships necessitates in situ study to truly understand the factors underpinning local land use conflicts. The dearth of rural research in the Pacific Northwest, and specifically Vancouver Island, presents interesting opportunities to build on established data from the UK and New England (USA), while adding to the relational thinking literature related to land use context (Eyster et al., 2023; Stenseke, 2018).

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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