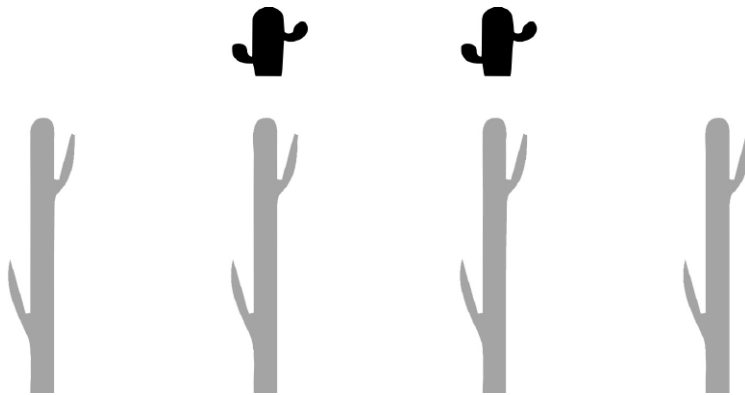


Looking for Thoreau's Cabin. Post-pandemic Lifestyle Migrations and Rural Idyll in Alt Millars (Castellón, Spain)



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***Looking for Thoreau's Cabin. Post-pandemic Lifestyle Migrations and Rural Idyll in Alt Millars
(Castellón, Spain)***

Highlights:

1. Lifestyle migrations are a topic of growing interest for studies on contemporary urban-rural migrations.
2. Lifestyle migration has significantly increased in some rural areas since the pandemic.
3. The rural idyll, reinforced after a long lockdown due to the pandemic, is the main motivation to migrate.
4. The image of the rural as a paradisiacal place seems to be more current than ever in the XXI century.

Abstract: In lifestyle migration studies, one of the issues that have raised most debates is understanding the decision process regarding the destination to be chosen and the conception or image of it. In these studies, the social construction of a rural tourist destination or the creation and dissemination of its image is a very important aspect, because it reflects and affects how the countryside is used by society. This research aims to analyse the image of rural areas normally based on a "rural idyll" of the lifestyle migrant, at the beginning of the migratory process, and how this image mutates (or not) after spending a year in the chosen destination. Two important conclusions can be drawn from this study. In the first place, even though lifestyle migrations are a minority in the set of migrations that occur in any country in a year, occasionally in some rural areas they are decisive to overcome their ageing processes since in many cases it is entire families that migrate and not just individuals or older people. Secondly, and at least in the case of Spain, the significant increase in lifestyle migrations to rural areas since the pandemic could be a response to classical urban problems, such as housing, mass tourism or mobility issues symptom of an incipient urban crisis, especially present in many large cities, which are currently losing population, although their metropolitan areas are not.

Keywords: Urban exodus; rural Spain, pandemics; migrations.

***En busca de la cabaña de Thoreau. Migraciones por calidad de vida pospandemia e idilio rural en el
Alt Millars (Castellón, España)***

Ideas clave:

1. Las migraciones por calidad de vida son un tema de interés creciente en estudios de migraciones contemporáneas ciudad-campo.
2. Las migraciones por calidad de vida hacia algunas áreas rurales han aumentado significativamente desde la pandemia.
3. El idilio rural reforzado después de los confinamientos por la pandemia, parece ser un importante motivo para migrar al campo.

4. La imagen de lo rural como lugar paradisíaco parece estar más vigente que nunca en pleno siglo XXI.

Resumen: En los estudios sobre migraciones por calidad de vida, una de las cuestiones que más debates ha suscitado es la comprensión del proceso de decisión sobre el destino a elegir y la concepción o imagen de este. En estos estudios, la construcción social de un destino turístico rural o la creación y difusión de su imagen es un aspecto muy importante, porque refleja y afecta al uso que la sociedad hace del medio rural. Esta investigación pretende analizar la imagen del medio rural normalmente basada en un "idilio rural" del estilo de vida emigrante, al inicio del proceso migratorio, y cómo esta imagen muta (o no) tras pasar un año en el destino elegido. De este estudio se pueden extraer dos conclusiones importantes. En primer lugar, aunque las migraciones por estilo de vida son minoritarias en el conjunto de migraciones que se producen en cualquier país en un año, ocasionalmente en algunas zonas rurales son decisivas para suavizar sus dinámicas de envejecimiento, ya que en muchos casos son familias enteras las que migran y no sólo individuos o personas mayores. En segundo lugar, y al menos en el caso de España, el importante aumento de las migraciones de estilo de vida a las zonas rurales desde la pandemia podría ser una respuesta síntoma de una incipiente crisis urbana, a problemas urbanos acuciantes como la vivienda, la masificación turística o la movilidad, especialmente presentes en muchas grandes ciudades, que actualmente están perdiendo población, aunque no así sus áreas metropolitanas.

Palabras clave: Éxodo urbano; España rural; pandemia; migraciones.

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1. *Introduction*

Lifestyle migrations is a topic of growing interest both for studies on tourist destinations and for studies on contemporary migrations since it is an example of fuzzy boundaries and increasing interplay between tourism and migration (Williams & Hall, 2000). The spread of mass information and communications technologies; expanding networks of faster and cheaper forms of transport; the flexibility of the labour market; the rise in living standards in rich countries, increased amounts of and commitment to leisure time as well as increased opportunities for flexible forms of working lives and early retirement are some macro-level factors that explain the increase of lifestyle migrations to touristic rural areas (Torkington, 2010). More recently, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic fueled remote working and tourism practices and a notable increase in the demand for short-term rentals and second homes in rural/coastal areas (Colomb & Gallent, 2022).

One of the issues that has raised most debates is understanding the decision process regarding the destination to be chosen by a lifestyle migrant and their conception or image of it, a classic theme in studies on tourist destinations (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Jenkins, 1999). In migration studies, life course and family cycle are essential to understanding the decision to migrate to rural areas (Oliva & Rivera, 2020; Rivera, 2020). The analysis of life courses and socio-biographies has shown how migrations mean different things to different groups and their different biographical

moments; for example, access to affordable housing, the family as a provider of assistance, parenting in the village and exclusive residential complexes (Oliva & Rivera, 2020).

Apart from that, in most of these studies, the social construction of a rural tourist destination or the creation and dissemination of its image is a crucial aspect, since it reflects and affects how the countryside is used by society (Yarwood, 2002). The imaginary of the rural is elaborated through political and ideological constructions of the meanings of the place (Halfacree, 1994; Oliva & Rivera, 2020) being one of the most common the so-called rural idyll. Lifestyle migrants and their rural idyll or image have been well documented in the case of International Retirement Migration and second-home owners (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009), but little research has been carried out in the case of national lifestyle migrants moving from urban to rural spaces and especially on how this image may change once the lifestyle migrant is settled in his new destination. This is a key point since Lifestyle migration is a search, a project, rather than an act (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009).

2. Aims and methodology

Thus, this research aims to analyse the image of rural areas normally based on a "rural idyll" of the lifestyle migrant, at the beginning of the migratory process, and how this image mutates (or not) after spending a year in the chosen destination. The research period extends from June 2020 to January 2023. This is the immediate period after the COVID-19 pandemic that caused thousands of casualties everywhere and a severe lockdown. In the specific case of Spain where this analysis is carried out, the confinement was total from March 13 to June 21, 2020, a period in which the country remained practically closed.

The image of a tourist destination can be influenced by many factors such as advertising, tourism policies, its tradition as a tourist destination, its social network impact its presence and positioning in social networks, specialised forums, or the media, and many other factors. For this reason, a rural area was sought without a previous "story" as a tourist destination and without any consolidated tourist image that could significantly influence the decision process for potential lifestyle migrants, to minimise the impact of tourism marketing campaigns. This rural area should have

recent lifestyle migrants, more precisely, persons who arrived since the COVID-19 outbreak. The natural region of Alto Mijares between the Valencian Community and the Aragon region in eastern Spain was chosen as a case study. The methodology used is based on Glaser and Strauss' grounded theory, both in selecting interviewees for theoretical sampling and in coding responses. The methodological design began with prior contact with all the local councils in the study area. In each case, information was asked about the arrival during and after the pandemic of new inhabitants who fit the lifestyle migration profile. A total of 77 people were counted. The sample of respondents was purposive, with the motive of residential migration being the main discriminator factor, along with four exclusionary criteria:

- Migration between June 2020 and January 2022 (a year and a half).
- Migration to municipalities with less than 500 inhabitants.
- Distance to large cities and airports of at least 60 minutes.
- Persons with Spanish nationality coming from big cities or urban areas.

From this, 20 people could be located and agreed to be interviewed. A total of three people were discarded because they did not meet at least one of the criteria established for the research: The remaining seventeen (10 women and 7 men) were divided into two differentiated groups to analyse the social construction of the image of rural areas by lifestyle migrants: on the one hand, people with some kind of link or previous knowledge of the territory (seven persons) and on the other hand, those who had no previous link (ten persons). Therefore, the analysis of the image of a rural tourist destination was carried out by exploring four different dimensions: image before (i) and after (ii) the migratory act; image of people with (iii) and without (iv) previous ties to the chosen destination.

Table 1.
Sociodemographic data of the interviewees

Nº	Age	Gender	Previous job	Arrives alone?	Municipality	Previous links to the place
1	<35	Male	commercial sector	Yes	Gúdar-Javalambre	Familiar ties
2	>64	Male	Blue collar worker	Yes	Gúdar-Javalambre	Familiar ties.
3	36-64	Female	Tourism	No	Gúdar-Javalambre	No, she moved in with a relative
4	<35	Female	Education	No	Gúdar-Javalambre	No, she moved in with a friend
5	36-64	Male	Catering	No	Gúdar-Javalambre	No, he moved in with relatives
6	<35	Female	Student	No	Alt Millars	No, she moved in with a relative
7	36-64	Female	Administration	Yes	Alt Millars	No
8	<35	Female	Computing	No	Alt Millars	No, a relative has family ties
9	>64	Female	Health sector	No	Gúdar-Javalambre	No, she moved in with a relative
10	36-64	Male	Blue collar worker	No	Gúdar-Javalambre	No, he moved in with a relative
11	36-64	Female	Administration	Yes	Alt Millars	A relative has family ties
12	36-64	Female	Private enterprise	Yes	Alt Millars	No
13	36-64	Male	Private enterprise	No	Alt Millars	No, he moved in with a relative.
14	36-64	Female	Blue collar worker	No	Alt Millars	No, she moved in with a relative
15	>65	Female	Designer	No	Alt Millars	No, she moved in with some relatives
16	36-64	Male	Blue collar worker	No	Alt Millars	No, he moved in with some relatives
17	<35	Male	Administration	No	Alt Millars	No, he moved in with some relatives

Source: Own source.

3. *Lifestyle migrants' rural idyll*

According to O'Reilly (2007), lifestyle migrants are relatively affluent individuals, moving, in masse, either part or full-time, permanently or temporarily, to countries where the cost of living and/or the price of the property is cheaper; places where, for various reasons, signify something loosely defined as a quality of life. Benson & O'Reilly remark that it is important not to reduce lifestyle migration to tourism as this undermines the diverse motivations and experiences of the migrants. Not all lifestyle migration began as tourism, and there has yet to be an adequate explanation of why people might want to turn their experiences from tourism into a way of life. One of the first authors who attempted to categorise lifestyle migrations were Fountain and Hall (2002). These authors identify four categories of urban migrants in rural areas, which they call migrations for quality of life (lifestyle migrations). The first and most widespread category is that of retired people who seek to enjoy a quiet environment with environmental and landscape quality during their retirement. They are lured by the perception of a close-knit community atmosphere coupled with the availability of a range of amenities and social services. Two other categories of lifestyle residents, often closely related, are also identified and referred to by Fountain and Hall (2002) as the 'artistic class' and 'stressed professionals'. These newcomers decide to migrate searching for a change of lifestyle with a better quality of life, often after taking early retirement or redundancy, and most closely fit with the image of the 'alternative lifestyles'. The fourth group would be the 'telecommuters'¹ who continue to work in the 'outside world' with the aid of new communication technologies while enjoying the benefits of a rural lifestyle.

However, as Fountain and Hall (2002) point out, the integration of these new residents is not always quick or easy. Sometimes they are people with a medium/high purchasing power, the famous creative classes of Florida (2005), who buy houses or villas in rural areas, which can lead to rural gentrification dynamics. However, the most common conflict between these new settlers and the natives is the clash of

1• The difference between this category and the digital nomads is that telecommuters are people who decide to fix their residence in rural areas, but they work remotely, whereas digital nomads only settle in a given territory temporarily.

perceptions and opinions about rural societies. Often these migrants build an idyllic image of the rural landscape and criticise any activity that could alter this image and consider themselves "protectors of their adopted town" (Fountain & Hall, 2002: 162), while residents who want to expand a farm, improve a road or build a new equipment protest alleging that "you can't eat the landscape" (Fountain and Hall, 2002). There is abundant and recent literature on the rural idyll as the dominant image in lifestyle migrants and urbanites in general, particularly the works of Michaela Benson and Karen O'Reilly or Marco Eimermann among others (O'Reilly, 2007; Benson & O'Reilly, 2009; Benson 2012, 2013; Eimermann, 2015; Shucksmith, 2018; Eimermann & Carson, 2023).

These authors remark that lifestyle migrations are a form of counter-urbanization since so many of the motivations for the move are encapsulated in the images and representations of the rural idyll (O'Reilly, 2007). This rural idyll is based on romanticised accounts of rural life, while the migrants' representations of the ills of their home society are often overstated (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009). Gaspar (2015) agrees that the main motivations for lifestyle migrants are as well linked to positively idealized views of the destination societies, and Yarwood (2002) suggests that there is a whole series of counterpoints to the rural myth that form an anti-idyllic view of the countryside. Nevertheless, it would also be naïve to consider that the rural myth shows a 'false' image of the countryside and that the public is always 'duped' by such images (Yarwood, 2002). Hence, Swaffield and Fairweather (1998) analyse the case of rural New Zealand, and how Arcadian ideals and values motivate people to move to the country and to remain there. According to Shucksmith (2018), this Arcadian idea of rural life is still portrayed as simple, innocent, and virtuous as part of a pastoral myth of a lost Eden, divorced from the harsher realities of rural life and masking exploitation and oppression. The following figure summarises the main components of the rural idyll usually evoked by lifestyle migrants (Table 2).

Table 2.
Rural idyll components in lifestyle migrants

Health and environment	Economy
Slow pace of life	Cheap property prices
Clean air	Cheaper cost of living
Healthy food	
Good climate	
Simpler living	
Social motivations	Cultural and psychological motivations
Feeling of community	Overcoming a trauma
Better work-life balance	Stepping back in time
Problem freePlace to play	Alternative lifestyles
	Fix /'anchor' the self
	National identity

Source: Adapted from Yarwood, 2002.

These components can be divided into four main areas: health and environmental motivations, economy, social factors, and cultural and psychological factors (Short, 1991; Halfacree, 1996; Swaffield & Fairweather, 1998; Sweetman, 1999; Williams & Hall, 2000; Yarwood, 2002; O'Reilly, 2007; Benson, 2012; Gaspar, 2015). First of all, there are motivations linked to environmental quality and public health. Rural societies are often portrayed as traditional and healthier ways of living compared to urban societies, because of the slower pace of life and simpler living, and environmental quality influences healthy conditions. Thus, many lifestyle migrants seek a healthier life in rural areas, which is perceived as a more "authentic" life compared to the superficial life of the city. Unlike traditional migration flows, the rationale for migration is not economic, but rather, focused on subjective motivations (Gaspar, 2015), to which must be added, that lifestyle migrants are relatively affluent individuals (O'Reilly, 2007). However, this does not mean that economic motivations are not present, both as a component of the rural idyll and as a factor in the decision to migrate. However, the social, cultural, and psychological motivations of the individual tend to be the most important in shaping the image of the rural destination. The main attraction of the rural environment as a destination for lifestyle migrants could be summarised as 'the relaxed and informal way of life' (Rodríguez et al., 1998).

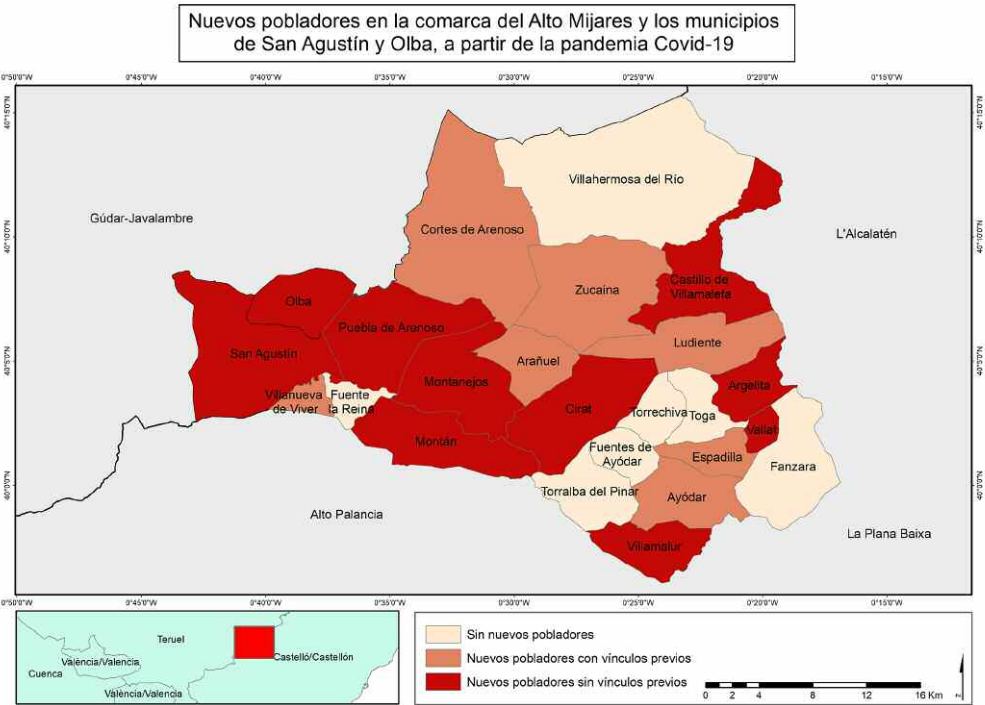
Rural societies are perceived by many lifestyle migrants as societies with fewer conflicts and problems than urban ones, with a stronger sense of community and neighbourliness, a slower pace of life, and therefore a better work-life balance, especially for care and more leisure time to develop artistic concerns. Finally, another set of motivations for lifestyle migrants is cultural and psychological reasons. For Benson and O'Reilly (2009), the symbolic capital of each individual (incorporating educational, cultural, and social capital) impacts the decision to migrate, and the destinations chosen, but also the life then led in the destination. Some people look to this migration for overcoming personal trauma (familiar problems or catastrophic events like a flood or the COVID-19 pandemic) or simply an alternative lifestyle more linked to his/her political ideology (for instance ecologists). Among these motivations, the search to "fix the self" (Sweetman, 1999) is especially important. The lifestyle migration would then act as a consolatory social representation and help to counter the ontological insecurity of the postmodern condition (Halfacree, 1996). To sum up and following Halfacree (1994), a rural idyll is a visioning of rural areas by a hegemonic middle-class culture, like lifestyle migrants, imposed on rural residents. From this point of view, Shucksmith (2018) suggests that a networked rural development offers possibilities for social actors to collectively and deliberatively imagine their future and the future of their places beyond the rural idyll hegemonic image held by urbanites like lifestyle migrants.

4. Imagining rural places

This section uses the example of Spanish lifestyle migrants who moved to the Alto Mijares rural region, to assess if the rural idyll components examined before could be applied to this case, and how this rural idyll changes after a period of living in the rural area, normally one year after, dividing migrants between those who had any kind of previous link to the rural area, and those who don't. Alto Mijares is a rural Valencian region divided into 22 municipalities and a total population of 3,857 inhabitants (IVE, 2023), to which are added the Aragonese municipalities of San Agustín and Olba, that form together a natural region articulated by Mijares river (Figure 1). This rural mountain and the isolated area have historically economically depended on livestock, and to a lesser extent on agriculture, and rural tourism plays a secondary role (COCEDER, 2023). This mountainous region, even though it has numerous natural attractions such as the Mijares River itself, the Sierra Espadán Natural Park, and the

Montanejos hot springs, is not a mass tourist destination or a particularly well-known national or international area. However, a first interesting feature is that since the pandemic, most municipalities have received Spanish migrants, and many of them had no prior relationship with the host municipality. The Alto Mijares is characterised by a Mediterranean mountain landscape with pine, holm oak and cork oak forests, rivers such as the Mijares and small rural villages with architecture reminiscent of the Alpujarras. This 'typically rural' landscape fits very well with the idea of a rural idyll analysed before.

Figure 1.
Post-COVID-19 migrants in the Alto Mijares region with and without previous personal links



Source: General data extracted from the interviews.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the mainstream adoption of technologies to support virtual collaboration, communication, and work from a distance (Hermann & Harris, 2020). This increased lifestyle migrations to rural areas thanks to the possibility of teleworking. Nevertheless, these trends were not durable and did not amount to a mass urban exodus (Colomb & Gallent, 2022; Gonçalves, 2022). It favoured some areas, particularly small rural municipalities of less than 5,000 inhabitants not very far from big cities, whose main protagonists are, fundamentally, the owners of a second residence (Baylina et al., 2022). One example is the Alto Mijares region. According to official statistical data, more than 120 arrived in the area between 2020 and 2022 (IVE, 2023). This is already important news since this territory lost 17 % of its population in just a decade, from 2011 to 2020 (IVE, 2023), so from the pandemic its demographic trends completely changed, and it registered a 20 % growth from 3,853 inhabitants in 2019 to 4,645 in 2023 the last available data. Of this group, 17 were the lifestyle migrants interviewed for this study.

Focusing on the results of the interviews, some basic data show that the majority consists of adults between 36 and 64 years old coming from the main metropolitan areas of the country (Madrid, Barcelona, and Valencia). This first piece of information is interesting since in this case the vast majority of migrants are adults of working age and not retired, which contrasts with the traditional image of studies of this type of migrant, such as those by Rodríguez et al. (1998) which focuses on North European retirees in the Costa del Sol in southern Spain. However, other studies published more recently concluded that in recent years most lifestyle migrants are above all families with children (Eimermann, 2015).

Of those interviewed, five are under 35 years of age, nine are adults between 36 and 64 years of age and only three are retired. The majority (12/17) come from the Valencian Community and Catalonia and the rest from Madrid, Castilla-La Mancha and the Basque Country. Migration motivations in general terms coincide with the components of the rural idyll exposed in the previous section. As can be seen in the following word cloud, environmental quality, the quietness of rural areas, silence, or stronger social ties are some reasons why these migrants decided to move to Alto Mijares (Figure 2). The image built by lifestyle migrants of this territory is that of a space of tranquillity, and silence, with a lively community, and a "village life" that they especially appreciate for its leisurely pace.

Figure 2.

Word cloud composed from the answers to the question: Which positive aspects has the rural region where you moved?



Source: Data from the interviews.

However, a closer look at the responses to the interviews clearly shows the existence of push and pull factors for this migratory process. Push and pull factors are a classic theme in the study of migration, especially urban-rural flows, and there is still an unfinished debate about whether it is rural territories that attract urban population, urban areas that expel population, or both dynamics at the same time (Walmsey et al., 1998; Eimermann, 2015). The set of 'pull factors' for lifestyle migrations is the rural idyll, which has different components depending on whether the person had previous links with Alto Mijares or migrated without having any previous experience, not even as an occasional tourist. It should be clarified here that a lifestyle migrant with previous ties is understood to be a person who either previously visited this territory as a rural tourist, or who has some personal link with the territory (for example, a relative or friend who resides or has resided there), but in any case, they are people from a big city who migrate to this rural territory in search of a better quality of life.

When asked about the main motivations for migrating to this territory, both those with and without previous family ties agree that the main one is the search for a calmer pace of life.

"I am not interested in the traditional way of living in the cities, I don't want to have to take out a mortgage to be able to live and I am interested in living as close as possible to nature and in more peace", says interviewee nº 4.

"I moved for the quality of life. I had strong episodes of stress in my job in the city", argues interviewee nº 11.

The rest of the factors differ depending on whether or not the person has previous links with the territory. For those interviewed with previous links, other important factors are the need to return to their roots, the feeling of community in the village and the quality of the environment. For those who have no previous links, they highlight that their new life allows them to better reconcile family life with their job, the quality of the rural landscape where they live and the good accessibility to the area.

Recalling the categories of lifestyle migrants by Fountain and Hall (2002), it seems that the group of lifestyle migrants who arrived in post-pandemic times to Alto Mijares coincides with the profile of "stressed professionals". In both cases, both people with and without previous ties to Alto Mijares, the most cited motivation is the slow pace of life and tranquillity. The COVID-19 pandemic is undoubtedly playing a very important role here. These people arrived just after being in a long lockdown for several months. On the one hand, this would explain the arrival of such many lifestyle migrants in a short period (just over a year) to a territory with no previous tradition as a migratory destination, and on the other hand, the motivations coincide precisely with some problems that arose during the pandemic. In the case of migrants with no previous ties to Alto Mijares, they found a better work and life balance in their new lifestyle and highlighted the accessibility of this area compared to their cities of origin, where for several of the respondents the traffic and the mass of people made any displacement take a long time:

"Here I work at ease, in contact with nature, working in different sectors. If I had stayed in my hometown I would be working for Amazon, in a different and less happy situation" (Interview nº 12).

"From my perception, everything is close here, compared to the time I lost to get around in the city, in Vallat it is more comfortable" (Interview nº 15).

In the case of lifestyle migrants with previous ties to Alto Mijares, other motivations for migration would fit within the category of cultural and psychological factors, and more specifically in the desire to "anchor the self" (Sweetman, 1999). Thus, another important motivation that, according to them, affects a better quality of life is the search for a feeling of community, of belonging to a group, of settling in a place with roots:

"I came here for the people. There is a feeling of collaboration and mutual aid. The valley is well cared for because the inhabitants participate, the ditches are in good condition thanks to the people's collaboration... or in the event of a fire, for example, everyone helps" (Interview nº 4).

In both groups, other classic motivations for lifestyle migration do not stand out too much, such as the good climate, something that lifestyle migrants from northern countries usually stress, or the cheaper cost of living, in this case, because the main motivation of this type of migration is not economic. An aspect in common in all the interviews is the existence in their life stories of a certain urban unrest or even "urban nightmare" (Short, 1991; Yarwood, 2002) that is quite marked. In most of the interviewees there is a feeling of hatred and boredom towards the city they come from, according to the answers to the question of why they decided to leave their city of origin:

"When we lived in Madrid, my partner had different episodes of stress and anxiety. We decided to come to the village because my relative had a house and we could also telework", argues interviewee nº 8.

"It was clear to me that I didn't want to be in the city. I was stressed and anxious. I saw the urban environment as aggressive and I didn't like the way people interacted with each other", says interviewee nº 17.

Stress, noise, and traffic, three classic problems in urban societies, are the main motivations for fleeing the city according to lifestyle migrants in Alto Mijares. Some of them also highlight other reasons of a social nature such as the social isolation characteristic of contemporary urban life, characterised by generally superficial interpersonal relationships, which some interviewees describe as an "artificial living" compared to life in the town, with closer and stronger social ties. Some interviewees highlight these reasons, especially after having experienced the lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic:

"At one point I realised that I was not happy in Valencia. I didn't like urban life consumerism around the bars. This is also seen in the rural environment but less so. At that time my mental health was not good" (Interview nº 6).

"My husband's stress and anxiety problems in the city led us to leave. Now we know that we didn't want life in the city" (Interview nº 8).

Therefore, it could be concluded that the construction of an idyllic rural image has not been carried out highlighting the intrinsic positive values of a rural area like Alto Mijares, but rather the result of an exercise of analysis and comparison between urban and rural lifestyles. In this analysis "push factors" are as important or even more important than the "pull factors" of a rural territory. The idyllic image is built in contrast to the urban image, which after the pandemic also seems to have worsened. All the interviewees consider the "push factors" to be of great importance in their decision to migrate. This idea is one of the main conclusions of recent studies on the impact of COVID-19 in cities (Bil et al., 2021; Del Romero Et Arroyo, 2022; Rowe et al., 2023; Petersen et al., 2024).

Some authors defend that protective measures (social distancing and isolation) that were globally implemented helped to slow down the COVID-19 spread but at the expense of mental health, psycho-physical conditions, well-being, and social relations within societies. Therefore, human experiences acquired during social isolation led to new (anti) urban trends (Bil et al., 2021). However, for other authors (Yarwood, 2002; Gaspar, 2015; Dörfler, 2021) who defend the rural environment as a more sustainable society than the urban one, this "rural idyll" would be a response to a new urban crisis already present before the pandemic, and this would only help to catalyse. According to Dörfler (2021), for example, before the pandemic, some studies warned of mental health problems arising in cities. This author pointed out, for example, that the probability of contracting mental health illnesses such as schizophrenia is more than double in people who lived and grew up during their first fifteen years in the city, and in fact, the probability of suffering schizophrenia is 2.37 greater in German cities than in their rural areas (Dörfler, 2021). Most of the interviewees indicated that their mental health was not good due to noise, stress, or anxiety problems, mainly when they lived in the city.

Another big question in this study was whether this image of rural idyll persists over time. Most of the interviewees migrated between mid and late 2020 to Alto Mijares. Lastly, they were asked how their perception of their migration destination changed one year later. The results were classified in this case as a single response.

In the first place, it is surprising that one year later, more than 40 % of those interviewed continued to hold the same opinion of the chosen destination. This is partly explained because a part of them had previously visited this territory and had some experience of what it is like to live in a town in Alto Mijares. In this sense, it could be affirmed that one year later, more than 40 % of those interviewed continue to maintain an image of a "rural idyll" concerning their new life in the countryside. It is not possible to generalise, as the sample of people interviewed is small, but it is

nonetheless relevant. Among the people who have changed their image regarding the rural environment in which they live, the lack of social life in many municipalities stands out in the first place, especially during the winters:

"I left the "stress of the city" behind, but now I have "rural stress". I thought I would have more social life... Even though I am in the neighbourhood association, there are quite a few days when I get bored" (Interview nº 3).

Another element that appears in some interviews is a classic theme in rural studies: conflict. Four interviewees highlight that they have changed their image regarding Alto Mijares, because they have had some kind of conflict, either with the local administration or with the neighbours. In some cases, they highlight that the local administrations do not meet the needs of the new inhabitants or that they do not feel welcomed among the residents of the town. Political disagreements also arise:

"I arrived with great enthusiasm, and I have encountered the same problems as in other places. I have not felt welcomed. I feel that people are suspicious of our new neighbours, we feel criticised and ignored" (Interview nº 10).

"The town council is not favourable to the arrival of new settlers. I have been disappointed by the people of Villamalur because there is a 'seasonal love' for the village. They talk a lot about how beautiful the village is in summer, but after September 'they don't even touch it with a stick' (Interview nº 6).

Indeed, as Yarwood (2002) points out, the rural environment is also a space for conflicts, even more violent than in the city, where historically there is greater freedom of expression. After the search for Thoreau's cabin running away from the city in a rural and natural area, some interviewees recognize that even in idyllic places there can be important conflicts. Some interviewees highlight as negative aspects of Alto Mijares that there are *"very narrow-minded mentalities"* (interview nº 4), or even that: *"in some towns, you cannot talk about politics"*, an aspect that surprises interviewee nº 15. It could then be said that the lifestyle migrants are almost divided into two halves between those who continue with the same positive perception of Alto Mijares and with a certain rural idyll, compared to the other half, who have either qualified their image of this territory, or it has worsened notably, especially due to conflicts with neighbours and local administrations. Despite all this, only one person would like to return to the city and another one doubts whether to stay or not. The rest seem to have made a fairly firm decision as lifestyle migrants because they consider that their situation has improved in general terms and that they have a

better quality of life now. Regarding the impact of the pandemic on the decision to migrate, only two people responded that the pandemic was a determining factor in the decision to migrate, while the majority considered that it was one more motivation, or that it precipitated a decision already made.

5. Discussion: looking for thoreau's cabin. A symptom of a new urban crisis?

In this study, 17 people were interviewed, most of whom are working adults. As soon as the pandemic ended, they decided to change their lives, and in many cases, they left their job, family, and social relationships in the big city, to move to a remote rural and mountainous region in the confines of the Valencian Community. Furthermore, most of them had never before been in this territory to which they decided to migrate, start a new life, or had not even previously lived in a rural environment. Due to the explanations, they give in their decision to migrate, there seems to be a certain "Thoreau's cabin syndrome". They want to find a new living space in a rural environment, quiet and far from the stress of the big city, close to pristine nature. Some of these lifestyle migrants also seek to live in a less "artificial" society with greater social ties. It could be affirmed that they react to the liquid modernity of Bauman (2003), looking for models of life with stronger social and neighbourhood relationships, in the face of the dissolution of the sense of social belonging of the human being characteristic of this liquid modernity and especially in the cities.

From a statistical point of view, the migrations registered after the pandemic, at least in Spain, cannot be characterised as an urban exodus (Jorrín, 2022). According to this author, after the pandemic the teleworking boom was fleeting and for the most part, it disappeared with the end of the restrictions. This caused the workers to physically return to their posts, which complicates their spread through Spanish rural areas. This is not, however, an important factor in lifestyle migrations, since, as previously seen, the main motivation for migrating is not economic or work-related. However, some cases such as Alto Mijares, a territory with hardly any tourist vocation, far from the coast and the main urban and economic centres of the country, show a certain urban malaise as a reason to undertake a lifestyle migration. Most of the interviewees highlight push factors from their city of origin as important motivations

for changing their lives. A year after migrating, most of them reaffirm their decision to live in a rural area and agree that their quality of life has improved, compared to the noise and stress of the city. Some of them have substantially qualified their initial perception of the "rural idyll", but even so they seem to have come to stay.

Apart from that, a substantial change can be seen in the traditionally negative image of rural areas in Spain. This image was characterised by cold and empty villages where only some aged persons live alone. Now lifestyle migrants draw a more positive image that currently attracts urban professionals to reside there as lifestyle migrants, and that also they do not fit the traditional lifestyle migrant profile of a retired person from a northern European country. Perhaps, as one of the interviewees argued, it is not so much that life in the cities has worsened due to traffic problems, the precariousness of working life, problems reconciling family and work, the weakening of ties or the increase in living costs, but rather a life in towns has been substantially positively changed with the improvement of digital coverage, the health system, transport infrastructure, and above all a cultural change that is beginning to value rural areas as a space of opportunity and not only as a space in crisis (Del Romero, 2023).

Like the neo-rural movements of the 1980s and 1990s in France, lifestyle migration to rural areas seems to be a minority current, but it goes beyond a fad or a reaction to a temporary traumatic event such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In the same way, and despite all the literature on the subject, the idea of a "rural idyll" in part of the population continues to be a valid concept to analyse the motivations of many migrants, particularly lifestyle migrants, although it is true that this research has shown the different perception shown by lifestyle migrants with previous ties to the territory, compared to those who had no previous experience.

Some municipalities in the study area, such as the case of Olba, show a significant percentage of neo-rural and lifestyle migrants (Sarasa, 2003; Pérez, 2021). This mountain municipality, divided into numerous villages which are arranged along the Mijares River, suffered, like the rest of the region, from an intense rural exodus until the 1980s, when some neo-rural communities began to settle. Since this decade the population has remained around 250 inhabitants and despite the difficulties of access and housing shortages, it is an important destination for lifestyle migrants. Given that many of these lifestyle migrants are families, in recent years Olba has gone from ten to 50 schoolchildren in a municipality of 260 inhabitants, which has led to the expansion of the school (Campo & Moreno, 2022). It is important to note that one of the main reasons for these migrations has been landscape values and an alternative educational model at school in which students study in contact with nature (Campo

& Moreno, 2022). Olba does not have a great offer of employment nor is it a municipality with great tourist attractions, which makes it an example of a destination for lifestyle migrants, in that the most valued resource according to the interviewees who have settled here is precisely its quality of life. Other municipalities such as Montanejos or San Agustín have experienced demographic growth in recent years, mainly fuelled by neo-rural and lifestyle migrants.

6. *Conclusions*

Lifestyle migrants are a minority type of migration when compared to migrations for family, work, or study reasons. Traditionally, studies on foreign lifestyle migrants have focused on groups of retired people from northern Europe who settle in sun and beach destinations or international migrants who settle in relatively remote rural areas of Europe, Latin America, or Oceania. Many of these migrants construct a rural idyll discourse when explaining their migratory act, a discourse that confronts a negative image of the "urban nightmare" that characterises their place of origin. This research has analysed how this discourse is also present in the national lifestyle migrants who start a new life project in a rural environment, and that this flow of lifestyle migrants is also present in remote rural areas that do not have great attractions or tourist infrastructures. This is perhaps one of the main novelties of this work: to see how the idea of a rural idyll is a fundamental motivation in the internal migrations of lifestyle migrants since most of the literature on this phenomenon focuses on international migrations.

This research analysed the lifestyle migrations produced since the COVID-19 pandemic to the mountainous region of Alto Mijares in rural Spain. This rural area in demographic crisis since the 1960s has seen a change in trend due to the arrival in recent years of numerous groups of migrants, and one of the most significant has been precisely that of lifestyle migrants. Most of them are urban young adults who decide to start a life project in a mountainous territory with which they had no previous ties. Again, the rural idyll, reinforced after a long lockdown due to the pandemic, is the main motivation to migrate. The positive image of the rural environment remains long after having migrated, and in this positive image, the comparison with a previous life in the city is very important, which is described as stressful, superficial, and noisy. As in other studies on lifestyle migrants, economic or

work motivations are not relevant in decision-making. Rural areas such as Alto Mijares have a cost of living very similar in terms of food or housing to that of any large Spanish city. This rural idyll that many migrants maintain with their new host territory is coloured later by the appearance of conflicts according to many of the interviewees. In the first place, the conflicts with the local population itself stand out, which in some cases is described as not welcoming new people. Secondly, there are conflicts with public administrations, especially due to the lack of support for the arrival of new inhabitants, or the scarcity of resources, a situation which is very different from that of many cities where lifestyle migrants come from. Another element that tints the image of the rural environment one year after the migratory act is the scarcity of social life in rural areas, especially during winter. However, the general perception of this migratory group is satisfied with their new life, especially when they compare it with their previous life in the city.

Two important conclusions can be drawn from this study. In the first place, even though lifestyle migrations are a minority in the set of migrations that occur in any country in a year, occasionally in some rural areas they are decisive to overcome their ageing processes since in many cases it is entire families that migrate and not just individuals or older people. Secondly, and at least in the case of Spain, the significant increase in lifestyle migrations to rural areas since the pandemic could be a symptom of an incipient urban crisis, especially present in many large cities, which are currently losing population, although their metropolitan areas are not. Considering the latest official data published in Spain, it cannot be said that there is a wave of neo-rural migration, but there is a significant arrival of new inhabitants in municipalities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, even though they cannot compete even in the offer of jobs, neither in services nor even in the price of housing with centres of more than 50,000 inhabitants. In fact, in recent years municipalities with less than 10,000 inhabitants have grown more than those with more than 50,000 inhabitants (Vilallonga, 2022). In these demographic changes in rural municipalities, the role of lifestyle migrants seems significant, and the social construction of the image of the rural environment as a paradisiacal place, a recurring and classic theme in studies on the rural environment, seems to be more current than never in the XXI century when explaining these migrations.

Finally, it would be necessary to carry out more studies of this type in Spain or other European countries to corroborate the thesis of a certain urban crisis, which according to the interviewees, was already present before the pandemic, but that this contributed to consolidating or accelerating the decision to migrate in search of a better quality of life.

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Conceptualization	100 %	0 %
Data curation	20 %	80 %
Formal analysis	30 %	70 %
Funding acquisition	100 %	0 %
Investigation	100 %	0 %
Methodology	100 %	0 %
Project administration	100 %	0 %
Resources	20 %	80 %
Software	0 %	100 %
Supervision	100 %	0 %
Validation	50 %	50 %
Visualization	0 %	100 %
Writing – original draft	100 %	0 %
Writing – review & editing	50 %	50 %

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