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Factors Associated with Return-to-Fishing Inflows in South Korea

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귀어유입과 정주여건의 관계 분석

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Abstract

This paper documents statistical relationships between urban-to-fishing inflows and province-level characteristics in South Korea. Using a coastal province-year panel from 2013 to 2020, we relate annual migration inflows to proxies for local economic conditions, service access, and environmental quality. The baseline specification uses a fixed-effects Poisson model to accommodate the count nature of the dependent variable, and we report linear fixed-effects and Tobit estimates as sensitivity checks. Across specifications, migration inflows are positively associated with greater doctor availability and better air quality and coastal water quality (as measured by PM10 and coatal total phosphorus).

Key words : Urban-to-fishing inflows, Fishing villages, Amenities, Environmental quality

Ⅰ. Introduction

Fishing villages in South Korea have been experiencing a steady decline in population. According to the 2020 Census of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, the number of households in these villages dropped by 47.6% and the number of residents by 61.4% between 2000 and 2020. In 2020, only about 43,000 households and 97,000 residents remained. This ongoing depopulation and aging of the population raise serious concerns about the long-term viability of local fisheries and the sustainability of coastal communities.

Since the late 2000s, however, interest in migration from urban to rural areas has grown. In South Korea, this trend has been associated with the retirement of the baby-boomer generation and broader efforts at lifestyle re-optimization (Kim and Ha, 2016; Ma and Park, 2019). In response, local governments have introduced a variety of settlement-support programs designed to facilitate the relocation of migrants to fishing villages.

Since 2010, federal policy initiatives have further reinforced these efforts. For example, the enactment and implementation of legislation on fostering and supporting agricultural and fisheries enterprises provided an institutional foundation for settlement assistance and economic activity in rural areas. Building on this framework, the 「Act on the Promotion of and Support for Return to Agricultural and Fishing Villages and Rural Communities」, implemented in 2015, aimed to

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encourage the stable resettlement of migrants and to advance the sustainable development of rural communities.

A substantial body of research has examined migration in rapidly developing economies, with particular attention to rural-to-urban inflows in countries such as China, Indonesia, and South Korea (DeWind et al., 2012; Kim, 2009; Lee, 2015; Lu et al., 2013; Marta et al., 2020; Resosudarmo et al., 2010; Seol and Skrentny, 2009; Tang, 2012). In the South Korean context, studies have focused on international labor migration and marriage migration (Coleman, 2002; Kim, 2009; Kim and Kilkey, 2018; Park, 1994; Torneo, 2016).

By contrast, empirical work on urban-to-rural migration remains relatively limited. Existing studies have often relied on survey-based evidence of satisfaction or motivation (Barcus, 2004; Jończy et al., 2021), with only a handful of analyses addressing agricultural villages in South Korea (Jung and Kim, 2019; Kim and Kim, 2020; Kwon and Yeo, 2018).

Research on fishing villages is even scarcer. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining urban-to-rural migration into fishing communities using publicly available panel data. Drawing on census statistics, prior surveys, and government reports, we analyze province-level indicators of economic conditions, infrastructure, and environmental quality. Thus, this study interprets urban-to-rural migration to fishing villages as a settlement decision shaped by multiple dimensions of local conditions. From this perspective, economic opportunities, access to local services, and environmental quality represent complementary province-level attributes that may jointly affect migration inflows. In doing so, we identify the factors that are closely associated with migration inflows into fishing villages.

This study contributes to several strands of literature. First, it extends the discussion of demographic change by focusing specifically on fishing villages. Second, it applies a panel-data approach to better capture province-level dynamics. Third, this study provides suggestive evidence regarding the relative importance of service access and environmental quality in shaping migration flows.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the background of urban-to-rural migration in fishing villages using census, survey, and policy materials and presents the empirical strategy. Section 3 presents data and the estimation results. Section 4 concludes with a discussion of implications and limitations.

Ⅱ. Research method

This section first reviews demographic changes in fishing villages, recent migration patterns, and policy and survey evidence on migration decisions. Building on these considerations, we identify the key variables that guide the empirical framework.

1. Demographic changes in fishing villages

Fishing villages in South Korea have become smaller and older over time. As shown in <Table 1>, both the number of residents and the number of households in fishing villages have steadily declined over the past two decades. The share of residents aged 70 and above rose sharply, from 6.62% in 2000 to 22.43% in 2020. Average household size also fell, from 3.08 persons in 2000 to 2.25 persons in 2020.

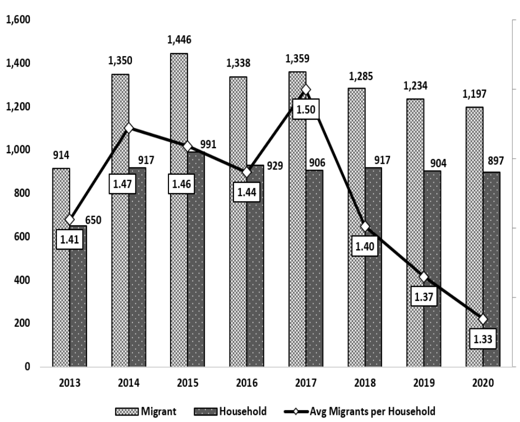
Against this backdrop of demographic decline, a distinct migration pattern has emerged. The number of urban-to-rural migrants moving to fishing villages

<Table 1> Demographic changes by age group

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
a. Household	81,571	79,942	65,775	54,793	43,149
b. Age group	251,349	221,132	171,191	128,352	97,062
0-14	33,119	24,113	15,698	8,604	5,570
15-19	19,897	10,926	7,049	3,863	2,135
20-29	28,096	20,390	12,002	6,038	4,327
30-39	26,553	17,826	12,873	8,176	5,392
40-49	45,059	38,602	24,280	13,364	8,887
50-59	46,464	46,778	40,607	31,860	19,562
60-69	35,530	39,827	34,659	32,675	29,480
c. 70-79	12,396	17,426	18,746	18,458	16,592
d. Over 80	4,235	5,244	5,277	5,314	5,180
Family members per household	3.08	2.77	2.60	2.34	2.25
% of over 70 years old	6.62%	10.25%	14.03%	18.52%	22.43%

Note : Family members per household are calculated as b/a, and the share of residents aged 70+ is calculated as ((c+d)/b)*100%

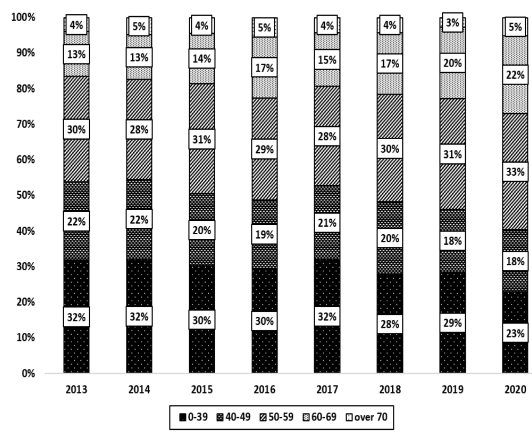
increased until around 2015 and then declined thereafter, as did the number of migrant households [Fig. 1].



[Fig. 1] The number of migrants and households.

Migrant household size fell rapidly after 2017, reaching 1.33 in 2020, and the share of migrants aged 50 and above rose steadily [Fig. 2].

These trends indicate that urban-to-rural migration is largely composed of small households—typically



[Fig. 2] The ratio of migrants by age group.

single individuals or couples—with growing prevalence among middle-aged and older adults.

Yet despite this inflow, fishing villages continue to face significant quality-of-life constraints. Government reports (The Ministry of Ocean and Fisheries, 2021a) show that average quality-of-life scores are lower in fishing villages (5.2) than in agricultural villages (5.8) or urban areas (6.4).

Remoteness exacerbates these challenges, limiting access to transportation, medical services, and cultural amenities. For instance, the Second Master Plan for Development of Fisheries and Fishing Villages for 2021-2025 reported that the average travel time from a fishing village to a medical facility was 89.5 minutes.

2. What do migrants consider?

To identify factors that may matter for migration decisions, we first review the 2020 Fact-Finding Investigation on the Status of Return to Farming and Fishing and Return to Rural Communities(The Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, 2020). Although the evidence from this survey focuses primarily on migration to agricultural villages, it provides a useful benchmark for migration to fishing villages.

The survey distinguishes two groups of rural migrants. The first consists of individuals who relocated to work in agriculture, while the second includes those who moved without engaging in farming.

<Table 2> summarizes responses from the first group. Environmental quality and economic opportunity emerged as key motivations: 29.3% moved for a better natural environment, 19.5% to work on or manage a family farm, and 18.6% for agricultural economic opportunities. When asked why they chose a specific town, 42.2% cited family origins, 26.8% proximity to their former city, and 8.2% better infrastructure.

<Table 3> reports responses from the second group. Here, 28.5% emphasized a less stressful lifestyle and improved environment, while 27.2% pointed to non-agricultural job opportunities. Affordable housing was noted by 8.5%. Regarding town selection, 19.6% mentioned workplace proximity, 17.5% family ties, and 14.0% affordable housing prices.

Overall, the findings highlight three broad categories shaping migration decisions: environmental amenities, economic opportunities, and settlement conditions. This framework underpins the empirical specification adopted in the study.

Taken together, the survey evidence suggests that migration decisions are shaped by a combination of economic motives, living conditions, and environmental amenities. This motivates our empirical framework, which groups the explanatory variables into economic, infrastructure, and environmental dimensions.

<Table 2> A survey on urban-rural migration for farming

(1) Motivation for migration	(2) Responses (%)	(3) Motivation for town	(4) Responses (%)
Environment	879 (29.3%)	Family's hometown	1,266 (42.2%)
Management of family farms	585 (19.5%)	Close to the city used to live	804 (26.8%)
Economic potential in agriculture	558 (18.6%)	Infrastructure	246 (8.2%)
Family's hometown	351 (11.7%)	Environment	168 (5.6%)
Health	228 (7.6%)	Affordable housing prices	159 (5.3%)
Tired of urban life	156 (5.2%)	Migration policy	90 (3.0%)
Unemployment	126 (4.2%)	Affordable cost of living	78 (2.6%)
High cost in urban area	108 (3.6%)	Best for agriculture	78 (2.6%)
Others	9 (0.3%)	Education	57 (1.9%)
Education	0 (0.0%)	Affordable land prices	39 (1.3%)
		Earlier migrants	12 (0.4%)
		Others	3 (0.1%)

<Table 3> A survey on urban-rural migration for living

(1) Motivation for migration	(2) Responses (%)	(3) Motivation for town	(4) Responses (%)
Other job opportunities	816 (27.2%)	Close to the office	588 (19.6%)
Stress-less life	474 (15.8%)	Family's hometown	525 (17.5%)
Environment	381 (12.7%)	Affordable housing prices	420 (14.0%)
Affordable housing prices	255 (8.5%)	Infrastructure	360 (12.0%)
Family's hometown	231 (7.7%)	Close to the city where I lived	348 (11.6%)
Urban fatigue	210 (7.0%)	Affordable land prices	228 (7.6%)
Personal health-related issue	138 (4.6%)	Natural environment	198 (6.6%)
Office relocation	129 (4.3%)	Less cost of living	165 (5.5%)
High cost of living in urban areas	117 (3.9%)	Children education	66 (2.2%)
Unemployment/Business failure	72 (2.4%)	Supportive migrant policy	54 (1.8%)
To become a farmer later	6 (2.2%)	Urban-rural migrants	27 (0.9%)
To work in the agriculture	36 (1.2%)	Others	21 (0.7%)
Child education	33 (1.1%)		
Management of family farms	27 (0.9%)		
Others	18 (0.6%)		

3. Government supports

In 2018, the Ministry of Ocean and Fisheries introduced the first master plan to encourage urban-to-rural migration into fishing villages. The plan was driven by structural changes such as a shrinking working-age population, rapid aging, and the retirement of the baby-boomer generation.

The policy rationale also reflected concern that existing support systems did not adequately meet the needs of prospective migrants. Many were more interested in service sector or tourism-related opportunities than in traditional fisheries, and differences in norms and lifestyles between urban and rural communities often posed barriers to settlement and integration.

To address these challenges, the government established migration information and education centers nationwide. These centers provide consulting services for potential and current migrants, along with training programs in fishing, aquaculture, and the customs and culture of fishing villages.

The master plan further introduced concrete support measures across aquaculture, housing, education, health, and welfare. Examples include reorganizing illegal aquaculture facilities to create opportunities for migrants to obtain licenses, property tax deductions and renovation subsidies for housing, partial tuition support for households with middle- or high-school students, subsidies for health insurance and childbirth grants, and welfare measures such as support for fishermen’s annuity insurance and labor replacement costs.

Taken together, these initiatives underscore the government’s view that economic opportunity, housing, education, health, and welfare are central to migrants’ settlement decisions, and highlight the importance of local service conditions in the context of fishing villages.

4. Estimation strategy

For the empirical analysis, we build on the key themes identified in the above three subsections as follows:

$$Migrants = f(Econ, Infra, Environ) \cdots\cdots (1)$$
$$E[Migrants|X] = \exp(\alpha_i + \delta_t + X'\beta) \cdots\cdots (2)$$

Specifically, economic conditions are proxied by primary-industry gross regional domestic product. Infrastructure is proxied by doctors per 1,000 residents and fishing-village population (a proxy for settlement size and related local conditions). Environmental quality is measured by particulate matter 10 (air quality) and coastal total phosphorus (water quality), where lower values indicate better conditions. Thus, X includes primary-industry GDP, doctors per 1,000, fishing-village population, PM10, and coastal TP. The rationale for including these variables is presented in the following Data section. In addition, building on Kwon and Yeo(2018), we exploit province-year variation and account for unobserved time-invariant heterogeneity across provinces. Province indicators α_i account for time-invariant differences across provinces, and year indicators δ_t summarize common time patterns relative to 2013. We interpret β as partial correlations conditional on these indicators.

Because the dependent variable is a nonnegative count and includes zeros, a standard linear fixed-effects model does not match the distributional properties of the outcome. A Tobit model may be considered when the dependent variable is limited at zero. Count-data models such as Poisson or negative binomial are also natural candidates when the dependent variable is an integer count (Cameron and Trivedi, 2010; Kim et al., 2020).

In principle, negative binomial models may be useful when overdispersion is present. However, there is a debate over the interpretation of fixed effects in panel negative binomial models and the extent to which such models fully remove unobserved heterogeneity (Allison and Waterman, 2002).

Thus, we estimate several alternative specifications -including a linear fixed-effects model, a panel Tobit model, a pooled Poisson model, and a fixed-effects Poisson model- and compare their qualitative results. We place emphasis on fixed-effects Poisson estimation with robust standard errors, which remains valid under more general conditions (Allison and Waterman, 2002; Wooldridge, 1999).

Ⅲ. Results

1. Data

We construct a province-year panel for 2013–2020 using data from the Korean Statistical Information Service. South Korea includes both metropolitan cities and provinces at the same administrative level. For simplicity, we refer to both types of jurisdictions as provinces. We restrict the sample to jurisdictions with a coastline and exclude inland areas without fishing villages, such as Daegu, Daejeon, Gwangju, Sejong, Seoul, and North Chungcheong. The final sample consists of eleven coastal provinces from 2013 to 2020.

The dependent variable represents the number of return-to-fishing migrants and their accompanying household members. A return-to-fishing migrant is defined in the source data as a person who had lived in an urban area for at least one year, moved to a rural area during the reference period, and was registered in an official list that recognizes fisheries participation. Accordingly, the analysis focuses on return to fishing rather than broader rural relocation.

We combine this with province-level information on gross regional domestic product of primary industries, the number of doctors per 1,000 residents, fishing-village population, PM10, and coastal total phosphorus. These variables are selected to proxy the three categories identified in the background discussion: economic conditions, infrastructure, and environmental quality.

First, we use gross regional domestic product of primary industries—including agriculture, forestry, and fisheries—as our main economic proxy. Alternative measures such as GRDP per capita or the value of fish production could also be considered. However, GRDP per capita reflects the structure of all industries in a province and may therefore be less informative about economic conditions relevant to fishing villages. We also prefer primary-industry GRDP to the value of fish production because a common feature of fishing-village livelihoods in South Korea is the joint engagement of households in both fisheries and agriculture (Cha and Shin, 2013).

Second, we use doctors per 1,000 residents and fishing-village population as infrastructure-related proxies. Doctors per 1,000 residents captures local access to medical services, which may be especially relevant if migrants are disproportionately middle-aged or older. Fishing-village population is included as a broad province-level indicator of settlement scale rather than as a direct measure of infrastructure. Because it may simultaneously capture population decline, aging, and other demographic shifts, we interpret this variable cautiously.

Third, PM10 and total phosphorus (TP) are included as objective proxy indicators of environmental quality. PM10 captures air quality relevant to everyday living conditions, while coastal TP captures water quality that may matter both for residential amenity and for fisheries-related local conditions. These variables do not directly observe migrant preferences, but they provide objective proxy indicators of air quality and coastal water quality that may affect the attractiveness of fishing villages as places to live and work. <Table 4> shows descriptive statistics.

<Table 4> Descriptive statistics (n=88)

Variable	Mean (S.D.)	Min	Max
Migrants	114.26 (151.56)	0	505
GRDP	2,680,479 (1,773,114)	131,988	5,535,643
Doctors	2.40 (0.35)	1.90	3.40
Population	11,274 (12,181)	1,307	52,933
TP	31.39 (15.32)	9.92	76
PM_{10}	42.66 (6.51)	28.00	54.00

2. Estimation results

<Table 5> reports the estimated relationships between migration inflows and the explanatory variables. Columns (1) through (4) present results from the linear fixed-effects model, panel Tobit model, pooled Poisson model, and fixed-effects Poisson model, respectively. All models are estimated with robust standard errors, and the panel specifications include province and year fixed effects.

Although the alternative models differ in functiona form and distributional assumptions, the air quality proxy shows a consistent directional relationship across specifications. In contrast, the results for the other variables vary by model. Differences in

<Table 5> Estimation results

	Panel F.E.	Panel Tobit	Pooled Poisson	Panel F.E. Poisson
GRDP	-0.0000 (0.0000)	0.0000 (0.0000)	-0.0000*** (0.0000)	-0.0000 (0.0000)
Doctors	151.7599 (104.7674)	117.4957 (138.3316)	-0.0864 (0.2026)	1.1602*** (0.3717)
Fishing village population	-0.0079*** (0.0021)	-0.0022 (0.0060)	0.0000*** (0.0000)	-0.0000*** (0.0000)
TP	-0.7706 (0.5681)	-0.5061 (1.2176)	0.0244*** (0.0053)	-0.0069* (0.0042)
PM_{10}	-1.7021* (0.7956)	-1.5035 (0.9255)	-0.0868*** (0.0098)	-0.0158*** (0.0052)
Robust S.E.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fixed Effects	Province, Year	Province, Year	Not Applicable	Province, Year
Log Likelihood	-415.5643	-453.0537	-1,477.5372	-303.7215

Note: Robust standard errors are reported in the parentheses. ***Significant at the 1 percent level. **Significant at the 5 percent level. *Significant at the 10 percent level.

statistical significance and coefficient signs across columns likely reflect the distinct ways in which each model handles zeros, nonlinearities, and the count nature of the dependent variable.

We emphasize the fixed-effects Poisson model as the main specification because the dependent variable is a nonnegative count with zeros.

First, the number of doctors per 1,000 residents is positively associated with migration inflows. The coefficient is statistically significant in the fixed-effects Poisson model and suggests that migration inflows are higher in province-years with better medical service availability. This pattern is substantively consistent with the age composition of recent migrants, who are increasingly concentrated among middle-aged and older households.

Second, fishing-village population is negatively associated with inflows in the preferred specification, although the estimated magnitude is small. Because the coefficient is identified from within-province changes over time, it may reflect broader demographic contraction, aging, or compositional shifts rather than infrastructure per se. We therefore interpret this estimate cautiously and do not treat fishing-village population as a clean measure of infrastructure at the province level.

Third, both PM10 and coastal TP are negatively associated with migration inflows, suggesting that worse measured air quality and worse coastal water quality are related to fewer migrants. These results should be interpreted as relationships with objective province-level environmental conditions rather than with directly observed household perceptions. The stronger association for PM10 may indicate that air quality is more linked to perceived livability, whereas coastal TP may be a noisier proxy for the environmental and economic conditions relevant to prospective migrants.

The coefficient on primary-industry GRDP is not statistically significant in the preferred specification. This may reflect limited within-province variation over the sample period, the aggregated nature of the measure, or offsetting mechanisms that weaken the net association between broad economic activity and migration inflows.

For interpretation, we focus on incidence rate ratios (IRRs), exp(β), from the fixed-effects Poisson model. Because marginal effects in nonlinear count models depend on the conditional mean and the values of covariates, we do not emphasize a single marginal-effect estimate as the main summary measure.

In <Table 6>, the IRR for doctors per 1,000 residents is 3.19 for a one-unit increase. However, because the doctor variable is measured at the province level and a one-unit increase is large relative to the sample distribution, this scale is not intuitive. In addition, doctor availability within a province may be concentrated in large cities rather than evenly distributed across fishing villages. For this reason, it is more informative to interpret the estimate using a 0.1-unit increase. On that scale, a 0.1 increase in doctors per 1,000 residents is associated with about a 12.3% increase in expected migration inflows, which is calculated by $(\exp(0.1 \times ln(3.19)) - 1) \times 100$.

<Table 6> Incidence rate ratios

	IRR	S.E.	Z-stat	P-value
GRDP	1.0000	0.0000	-1.3700	0.1720
Doctors	3.1906	1.1859	3.1200	0.0020
Fishing village population	1.0000	0.0000	-2.9800	0.0030
TP	0.9932	0.0041	-1.6600	0.0980
PM10	0.9844	0.0052	-3.0100	0.0030

By contrast, a one-unit increase in TP and PM10 is associated with about a 0.7% and 1.6% decrease in expected inflows, respectively. The stronger association for PM10 than for TP is notable. One possible interpretation is that air quality more directly affects perceived livability for prospective migrants, whereas coastal water quality may be a noisier proxy for the environmental and economic conditions that matter to settlement decisions. Initially, one might expect water quality to matter at least as much as air quality in fishing villages because of its potential link to fishing productivity as well as residential amenity. The estimates, however, suggest that the more direct and observable amenity channel through air quality may be more salient in migration decisions.

Ⅳ. Conclusions

This study examines province-level associations between urban-to-rural migration inflows into fishing villages and local economic, service, and environmental conditions in South Korea.

Using panel data for 2013–2020, we document that migration inflows are higher with greater doctor availability and better measured air and coastal water quality. By contrast, we do not find robust evidence that primary-industry GRDP is related to migration inflows.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that policies aimed at attracting migrants to fishing villages may be more effective when they complement economic support with improvements in medical access and environmental management. In recent years, the South Korean government has recognized the importance of infrastructure in fishing villages and has expanded investments under policies such as the Fishing Village New Deal project and the second master plan for fisheries and fishing-village development(The Ministry of Ocean and Fisheries, 2021a, 2021b). These efforts include the construction and renovation of ports, installation of breakwaters, improvements in medical and community facilities, and support for local education and digital infrastructure. To the extent that such policies improve everyday living conditions, they may also support migrant settlement. At the same time, some of these implications overlap with broader regional revitalization or depopulation-response policies. The results should therefore be interpreted as informing one component of fishing-village settlement policy rather than defining the full direction of return-migration policy.

This study has several limitations. First, the analysis is descriptive rather than causal and is based on province-level data for 2013–2020. As a result, the estimates do not capture within-province heterogeneity across fishing villages or household-level migration motives, and they should be interpreted as province-level associations rather than evidence on migration mechanisms. In addition, important determinants such as housing prices, commuting access, local labor-market opportunities, and family networks are not directly observed in the available data.

Second, several explanatory variables are broad proxies that may reflect multiple underlying channels. Fishing-village population may capture demographic change as much as infrastructure, while primary-industry GRDP may be too aggregated to capture the types of economic opportunity relevant to migrants. Likewise, PM10 and coastal TP should be interpreted as broad settlement-scale indicators of environmental quality rather than direct measures of migrant preferences.

Future research would benefit from county-, town-, or household-level data that include housing conditions, transport accessibility, employment opportunities, and migrant characteristics. Such data would make it possible to distinguish more clearly between amenity-driven migration, retirement-related settlement, and migration motivated by fisheries employment. Higher-resolution data would also make it possible to study spatial dependence and the role of access to nearby cities more directly.

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