

SENSE OF PLACE ALONG A SCENIC BYWAY IN MAINE

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Abstract.—Sense of place defines the value and meaning of location. The Rangeley Lakes area of Maine, an unusual natural environment with cultural and historic significance, was nationally recognized in 2000 by the designation of the Rangeley Lakes National Scenic Byway. A survey during the summer of 2006 sought to identify sense of place in the midst of tourism-related growth and development. Respondents, primarily visitors with above-average income and education, were attached to specific special places in the area. Perceptions concerning threatened places were not place-specific but were regional and connected to general environmental issues.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The rich, known human history of the Rangeley Lakes area of Maine began with Abenaki Indian hunting and fishing camps. Edward Ellis (1983) reported that by the early 1900s, more than 200 fishing guides made their living in the area while extravagant resort hotels and sporting camps flourished on Mooselookmeguntic and Rangeley Lakes. When rail travel declined due to the ascendance of the automobile, Maine built roadways along Benedict Arnold's famous trail and old Indian trail systems that connected the St. Lawrence River to the Maine coast (Franklin, 2006). Historically, these roadways were the site of travelers passing for

trade, raid, or migration and are considered some of "the most history-laden roads in the state" (Franklin, 2006, p. 32).

Rangeley Lakes National Scenic Byway (RLNSB) is one of 126 distinct roads designated by the U.S. Secretary of Transportation under the umbrella of "America's Byways" with the purposes of promoting the nation's scenic corridors and protecting natural and cultural resources (Yamada et al., 2002). In partnership with Rangeley Lakes Heritage Trust (RLHT), RLNSB is working to protect "the integrity of the landscape, the character of the region, and the quality of life cherished by residents and visitors alike" (Rangeley Lakes Heritage Trust, 2005, p. 4).

Today, the Rangeley Lakes area, with 1,200 permanent residents, remains a destination vacation spot providing magnificent mountain, lake, and river views with access to 33,000 acres of conserved public lands. Year-round recreational activities include fishing, hiking, hunting, skiing, snowmobiling, and wildlife viewing but the popularity of the area has brought change. Condominiums are on the hillsides, jet skies are on the lake, ATVs are in the remote areas, businesses are stretched linearly along Route 4 near Rangeley, and the narrow two-lane roadways are congested with travelers and local traffic. Increasing property taxes are putting pressure on residents as large vacation and retirement homes are built. During the summer of 2006, the Maine Department of Transportation (MDOT) sponsored a survey on the nearby Old Canada Road National Scenic Byway. The director of the RLNSB requested a preliminary survey in the Rangeley area as a first-look evaluating sense of place, perceptions of growth among residents and visitors, and determining impact on special and threatened places. This research was a response to that request.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Among many definitions for “sense of place” in the literature, an important component is emotional identification with a landscape (Cantrill, 1998; Galliano & Loeffler, 1999). Cheng et al. (2003) defined sense of place as “the rich and often powerful emotional sentiments that influence how people perceive, experience, and value the environment” (p. 87). Tuan (1977) discussed several dimensions of the environment in terms of “space” and “place” and acknowledges that “space is an abstract term for a complex set of ideas” (p. 34). Many researchers have made an effort to clarify these dimensions and explore the connection to environmental attitudes and behavior. Bolt et al. (2003), however, cautioned against too narrow a construct that associates place with “only built or only natural environments”; they encourage consideration of “experience of all varieties of places” (p. 101). Many researchers point out that sense of place is socially constructed and that people give meaning to places when they interact with the environment (Eisenhauer et al., 1999; Galliano & Loeffler, 1999).

Galliano and Loeffler (1999) asserted that it is important for natural resource managers to investigate “how humans identify, describe, and interact with the environment [in order to] more actively inventory and understand the meanings people attach to the lands and resources they manage” (p. 1). Natural resource managers have historically regarded specific places or settings as products that are useful for meeting recreation needs; in this context, if one setting proves unsuitable, another can be substituted (Williams et al., 1992). Mitchell et al. (1993), however, found important differences between use-oriented and attachment-oriented visitors to a place; use-oriented individuals connect environmental qualities to activities and experiences while attachment-oriented visitors value the settings themselves over the activities and experiences enjoyed there. Cheng et al. (2003) also suggested that connections between people and place extend far beyond use. The concept of “sense of place” has the potential to bridge the gap between the science and management of ecosystems by offering managers a “way to

anticipate, identify, and respond to the bonds people form with places” (Williams & Stewart, 1998, p. 18). With regard to place, an economic or commodity metaphor can thus be replaced with a focus on the human values, experiences, benefits, satisfactions, meanings, symbols, and emotions that have important implications for management of natural areas (Williams et al., 1992; Williams & Stewart, 1998; Galliano & Loeffler, 1999; Eisenhauer et al., 2000; Davenport & Anderson, 2005). Many managers understand that place meanings affect public responses to programs and the management decisions and may be a barrier to the success of management strategies such as substitutability (Eisenhauer et al., 2000).

A key topic in sense of place is place attachment. Williams et al. (1992), Cheng et al. (2003), and Davenport and Anderson (2005) referred to the connection between place and “self-identity,” “social-group identity.” Cantrill (1998) discussed the “environmental self (i.e. that portion of one’s self-construct system associated with the larger environment, seen through the lens of personal history)” (p. 304). Bolt et al. (2003) explained place identity as a “sense of self-in-place” representing a “higher level” concept and potential predictor of behavior that may explain mental and emotional investments in a location (p. 106).

Human perceptions of the environment are also intimately connected to the physical attributes of place and the impact of change on the landscape. Stedman (2003) asserted that, “It is crucial that we understand the importance of meanings and how they may change in response to physical landscape change” (p. 682). According to McCool and Martin (1994), tourism-induced change can disrupt a community’s sense of attachment and destroy the value of the community in people’s eyes; their study also raises interesting questions about length of residency and attachment. Davenport and Anderson (2005) asked, “What happens to sense of place when places change?” (p. 630). Conflict over natural resources can include alienation between residents vs. newcomers caused by differences over use (Cantrill, 1998), “in-groups” vs. “out-groups” (Cheng et al., 2003), or community

members vs. outside developers (Davenport & Anderson, 2005). Davenport and Anderson (2005) concluded that “contentious issues like development can be better understood by identifying and examining place meanings” (p. 639). Vorkinn and Riese (2001) examined the affect of change on the attitudes of local inhabitants and whether attitudes can be predicted based on different levels of place attachment; they conclude that “place attachment also predicts the attitudes toward specific proposed environmental change” (p. 260).

3.0 METHODS

The purpose of this study was to survey people visiting or living in communities along the RLNSB in Maine about their perceptions of the area and their opinions about how it had changed over time. This study is rooted in land managers’ and decisionmakers’ concerns about the effects of tourism, population growth, and land development on the RLNSB region.

Travelers along the RLNSB were surveyed in four MDOT rest areas (Chambers Park, Smalls Falls, Whip Willow, and Rangeley Overlook) during the summer of 2006. They were asked to respond to 18 questions and complete a map exercise. The survey collected demographic data and information about their trip including their place of origin, the purpose of the trip, their method of travel, and the length of their stay. Repeat visitors were asked how many years they had been coming to the area and how they thought the area had changed over that time. Questions were designed to explore the multiple reasons people might visit the byway. Systematic random on-site surveying during the peak summer season resulted in 678 completed surveys. A nearly equal number of randomly selected AM (10 a.m. to 2 p.m.) and PM (2 p.m. to 6 p.m.) times were assigned to the randomly selected days. There was a nearly equal distribution of weekends and weekdays, excluding holidays which were treated separately.

4.0 RESULTS

Survey participants ranged in age from 18 to 83 years, with a median age of 47 years. Mean income was

above average in the \$50,000 to \$74,999 category and 48 percent of respondents held a college degree. About 55 percent were male. More than one-third were in the area for only one day (day-trip) while 46 percent stayed overnight on extended visits of four or more days (Table 1). Seventeen percent were first-time visitors, indicative of new tourism flowing into the area. Questions that explored why people had chosen to come to the area indicated that most were there because of the natural resources (72 percent). Eleven percent had friends and family in the area and were designated as social-based visitors. Fourteen percent of respondents were seasonal or full-time residents.

When asked if the Rangeley Lakes area had changed, 39 percent responded that they had observed a change for the better since they first came to the area. Positive changes related to growth and development included improvements in amenities, services, appearance, byway facilities, or economic factors. Twenty-five percent of respondents reported that the area had changed for the worse with regard to cultural character, environmental issues, regulation/zoning, or economic issues. Over one-third of participants were not sure about change or did not recognize any change. There were many comments about perceptions that the Rangeley Lakes area was undergoing tourism-related changes:

- “Rangeley is unusual – high percent [of people] from away and a small group of have-nots who clean cabins. The money people say they don’t want anyone else, but we need jobs and housing.” (Resident, 4 years)
- “Could be loved to death. I came here, others want to come too. They will want to build.

Table 1.—Visitor profile

Category	% of respondents
Overnight, resource	58%
Day-trip, resource	14%
Overnight & day-trip, social	11%
Seasonal residents	7%
Residents	7%
Non-recreational	3%

I have no right to restrict others but I am concerned for Rangeley being mobbed.”
(Resident, 18 years)

- “[It’s] crowded, too many McMansions, moved here to get away from it but it is following, but the IGA [supermarket] is an improvement.”
(Resident, 38 years)
- “People from the cities on vacation...make it more city and should not change it.” (Resident, 20 years)
- “...It will turn into just another junked up tourist location, yuck.” (Visitor, 33 years)

To determine visitors’ satisfaction with specific aspects of the area, respondents were asked to rate nine items on a five-point *expectation* scale (Table 2). Respondents were then asked to rate their level of *satisfaction* for the same nine items on a five-point attainment scale. Five of these items had satisfaction levels higher than expectation levels: forests, rural area, mountain views, lake views and rivers. Mountain views had the highest expectation level, while forests had the highest satisfaction level. Satisfaction ratings were lower than expectation ratings on the remaining four items: quiet setting, wildlife, uncrowded setting and lakes). Quiet setting had the greatest difference between expectation and satisfaction while wildlife had the lowest overall satisfaction level.

The map exercise asked respondents to identify three “special places” and three “threatened places.”

Table 2.—Visitors ratings

Feature	Expectation mean	Satisfaction mean	Difference
Forests	4.40	4.54	+ .14
Rural	4.32	4.46	+ .14
Mountain views	4.49	4.56	+ .07
Lake views	4.45	4.52	+ .07
Rivers	4.40	4.47	+ .07
Quiet Setting	4.47	4.36	- .11
Wildlife	4.41	4.31	- .10
Uncrowded	4.40	4.32	- .08
Lakes	4.55	4.52	- .03

Expectation: 5=Very important; 1=Very Unimportant;
Satisfaction, 5=Fully met; 1=Not at all met

There were 537 “most special places” given of which 92 percent of the responses were distinct and mapable locations. Seven percent of respondents said everything was special, and just over 1 percent mentioned generic natural places (the lakes, the forests). Including all responses, nearly 1,300 special places were mentioned by the 678 respondents (Fig. 1). When asked to designate “threatened places,” many respondents said they could not think of anything. The question was then re-worded to ask what “places or things” in the area were threatened. After that change, 460 responses were given. Threat-related issues included over-development (n=105), protection of natural resources including wildlife (n=67), land access and forest issues (n=57), Rangeley Lake environmental issues (n=42), cultural issues, Town of Rangeley (n=42), water quality (n=27), and scenery and fishing decline (n=18).

5.0 DISCUSSION

The data support the idea that tourism-related growth and development is causing a lot of concern among people who live in or visit the area. One caution is that our survey respondents were primarily resource-oriented and older, perhaps as a result of our sampling method. Nonetheless, a very high percentage of visitors (83 percent) identified “over-development” as the greatest threat to the area. While five natural features of the area exceeded respondents’ expectations, four did not, indicating that the area was less quiet, more crowded, with less wildlife and a less-than-ideal lake environment than visitors expected. It is notable that many visitors’ special places were distinct, definable, and mapable. A portion of survey respondents indicated that they had use-oriented attachments to the area (e.g. fishing, skiing, wildlife viewing) while the great number of special places mentioned could indicate attachment-oriented visitors. The inability to name threatened places could mean that people do not perceive their special places as threatened. However, the many environmental and tourism-related issues that were brought up after the question was expanded may hint at people’s attachment-oriented concerns and highlights the need for further study of this issue in the area.

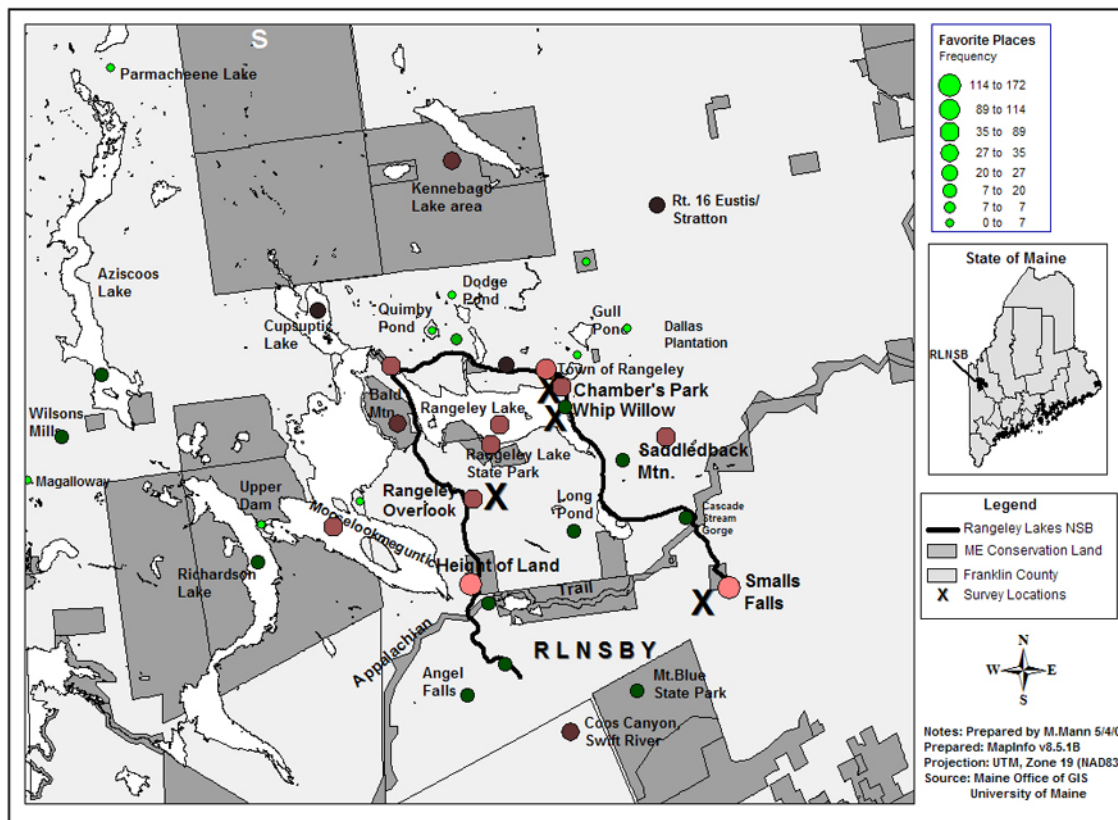


Figure 1.—Rangeley Lakes National Scenic Byway: special places.

Survey responses indicate that setting is important in the RLNSB area and should be incorporated into public management of natural resources in this area. Attachment and the level of attachment may help explain people's different perceptions of change (Vorkinn & Riese, 2001). Better understanding of contentious issues of a social nature in the Rangeley Lakes area could provide guidelines and management direction regarding sustainable tourism development. As this was an exploratory study, more research into sense of place would be useful in defining "place" and "space" and would help resource managers design effective strategies for sustaining the region's resources in the face of pressure from tourism and development.

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