# POST-UTILITARIAN FORESTRY: WHAT'S PLACE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

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## ABSTRACT

Place ideas take a more holistic and embedded view of socio-ecological reality and have begun to influence many aspects of resource management, from ecosystem management to community-based collaboration. The flux we might call post-utilitarian forestry can be understood as a renegotiation of a long-standing dialectic tension in Western thought between universalist and particularist views of knowledge. This paper proposes that post-utilitarian forestry seeks to balance the universalist-particularist dialectic by re-*placing* resource management in three ways: providing a broader and more spatial consideration of landscape meanings, embracing critical pluralism in the conduct of science, and pursuing a placed and pragmatic approach to the ordering of values in natural resource decision making.

## INTRODUCTION

Within the social science academy the term *postmodernism* will no doubt endure as an intellectual bookmark for describing the last decade of the twentieth century. Within the broader society many will chronicle the time as a period when so much in social theory was challenged. But this "postmodern mood," as Bernstein (1991) calls it, not only impugns what were thought to be triumphant social and political ideals of modernity and the Enlightenment, in the past decade it has begun to permeate paradigmatic debates within natural resource management. Postmodernism surely has contributed to the emergence of a "post-utilitarian" phase in natural resource management – a phase that afflicts not just human dimensions thinking but all aspects of natural resource management. One example of how postmodern ideas and debates have influenced natural resource management centers on notion of "place" in both ecological and social dimensions. Place is implicated, for example, in how we understand the meaning and value of nature, how we envision the role of science in natural resource management, and how we conceptualize planning and decision making. Though my own research during much of this past decade has been strongly associated with the concept of place attachment, what I want to do here is lay out a broader vision of how and why "place" figures so prominently in this era of "post-utilitarian" resource management.

Writer/ecologist Ed Grumbine seems to think place has something to do with the post-utilitarian turn when he writes: "Ecosystem management should not be the end product of our inability to control ourselves. It should be the first step toward discovering place, coming home" (1994, p. 242). Environmental problems, according to Grumbine, are the product of a lost, forgotten, or "atrophied" sense of place. I too consider environmental problems to be exacerbated by modern ways of thinking and acting in the world, ways that tend to neglect space and place. But unlike Grumbine and many in the radical ecology camp – who believe that there is an authentic biocentric (natural) way of acting and dwelling in the world, a "true sense of place" to be

discovered or recovered – my regard for the concept of place stems from the opposite position: places, whether modern or ancient, are cultural constructions made by the actions of conceiving human subjects. Consequently resource management has been hampered not so much by anthropocentric arrogance or a failure to "adapt to the conditions that limit existence," as Grumbine claims, but by the narrowness of instrumentalism and technical thinking, by "unnecessarily constricted misconceptions of science and reason in human affairs" (Dryzek, 1993, p. 213). Place indeed has a lot to do with post-utilitarian forestry, not because our human sense of place has atrophied, but because we fail to fully appreciate humans as "makers" of the world.

The goal of this presentation is to show how post-utilitarian discourse on natural resource management turns in various ways on the concept of place. I begin by suggesting that something of a "geographic turn" in social thought is emerging as a response to the "placelessness" of Enlightenment thought. I follow this by examining, in particular, how a social constructionist interpretation of place figures in three discursive dimensions of post-utilitarian resource management – namely how we map the meanings of nature (places), how we conceive and conduct science, and how we politically order values.

## THE PLACELESS ENLIGHTENMENT

Post-utilitarian natural resource management is one reflection of a wider "geographic turn" in ecological, social, and political thought. This geographic turn represents an attempt to correct what some see as the neglect of space and place in Enlightenment thought. An effort to "spatialize" social theory motivates research on such topics as community attachment and identity in sociology and sense of place in the environmental design fields and literary studies. It also has influenced some brands of environmental philosophy (e.g., bioregionalism). The Enlightenment generally refers to the emergence of an "age of reason" in European thought that began early in the 18th century and corresponds loosely with industrialization of Europe. Boiled down, it can be characterized as the triumph of universal principles over parochial dogma and is thus associated with certain attitudes toward the world (e.g., scientific and human progress), an industrialized and market oriented economic order, and political institutions and practices organized into nation states where political legitimacy is based on reason giving rather than force or tradition (Giddens and Pierson, 1998). The rationality embedded in Enlightenment thought, however, also fostered a deeply rooted "eclipse of place" that Geographer John Agnew (1989) traces to the modern emphasis on national scale processes, placeless national society over place-based community, and the detachment of people from places through the commodification of (among other things) land.

As Shields (1991, p. 50) notes: "In the commonsensical world that we inherit from the Enlightenment, 'space' has little concreteness: unobservable as such, it is presumed not to exist." This placeless Enlightenment emphasizes the universal perspective of *science* (i.e., preference for abstract, generalizable laws of nature), mass c*ulture* (i.e., decline of tradition and an emphasis on society over community and exchange value in place of use value), and emancipatory *politics and ethics* (i.e., nation states, universal rights, individualism, and sovereignty). In Enlightenment thinking nature is reduced to mechanism and "clockwork" parts. It is disenchanted and stripped of meaning apart from the instrumental uses that might be invented by society. Society is

understood as little more than an aggregate of individuals who are liberated from local ways of life, community mores, and parochial society.  Identities are reduced to individual expressions of preference and desire.

Enlightenment thought has promoted a tension between universalist and particularist worldviews – between global expertise and local/indigenous knowledge – the same tension that drives the current debates within natural resource planning and decision making.  Many in the environmental community, for example, struggle with the contradictory sentiments of wanting to be both *modern* in their enthusiasm for science and the search for universal justice and *anti-modern* in what they see as loss of tradition and the decline of local cultures along with the fragmentation, if not outright destruction, of ecosystems.

Another way to look at this tension is to contrast optimistic and pessimistic views of the Enlightenment. Those holding the optimistic view see the Enlightenment as progress and express confidence in science and technology and the rational, modern world order it engenders.  To the optimists, modernity creates high standards of living, a global economy and culture, and universal moral principles in contrast to narrow parochial interests and oppressive moral conformity.  Place is something to be standardized as exemplified in retail and commercial landscapes of chain-store malls and freeway culture.  Providing a unifying framework, optimists see modernity and even post modernity as liberating identity from the local and parochial, and thereby creating opportunity and power for those who have had little voice in the past.

For the critics, pursuit of mass culture and universal moral order has come at the expense of local community.  The pessimistic view of modernity and the Enlightenment sees virtue in a traditional local community and sense of place.  In contrast, the rise of mass culture and geographic mobility are seen as homogenizing the cultural landscape and weakening attachments to local place.  Geographic homogeneity is likened to biological monocultures with their attendant biological, social, and technological risks.  Political heterogeneity is a virtue, for example, in the way local governments sometimes serve as smaller scale "laboratories" for social policies.

## MAPPING PLACE MEANINGS

In response to the criticism that nature in the Enlightenment is little more than a storehouse of commodities, a key discursive dimension of post-utilitarian thinking has to do with embracing a broader consideration of landscape meanings and values.  According to this emerging discourse viewing natural landscapes as meaning filled places rather than containers of resources moves natural resource management beyond a commodity metaphor for nature and acknowledges and considers other, often less tangible, meanings and values.  Natural landscapes as places can be repositories of history, ritual, cultural and spiritual meanings, social and personal identities, and emotional memories.

Such criticism of the Enlightenment has given rise to two, often conflated, ways in which "place" has entered into academic discourses.  From the pessimistic perspective, concerns for place motivate a kind of social movement emphasizing a *normative* critique for how we should value nature or landscape.  This view is popular among some environmental philosophers, as

well as some scientific ecologists (Grumbine combines both). Not unlike Grumbine's atrophied sense of place, this view sees the authenticity of many places as threatened by modernity and globalization. In fact, place takes on two different romantic virtues in this pessimistic view of Enlightenment. One emphasizes the idea that the good life is to be found in nature. The other emphasizes that the good life is to be found in community (Hayward, 1994).

In contrast to these essentialist or pessimistic views, a progressive view of place meanings originates in an *epistemological* critique of the Enlightenment. Rather than dwelling on the potentially lost or atrophied spirit or essence of a place, the progressive critique sees place as the evolving product of social construction. Accordingly, places are made and re-made through continuous human actions. While these social actions are not politically neutral or necessarily consensual or even planned, the net effect is still to construct places. And while there is no original, organic, true character of a place that one can go back to, part of the political construction of place is, in fact, to promote the preservation of place or the restoration of some lost sense of place. Following the epistemological critique, the Enlightenment has promoted a narrow utilitarian construction of nature as a storehouse of commodities, but other constructions are possible and desirable. Social constructionism, however, should not be confused with the argument that humans necessarily get their way with nature or make the world conform to their desires. Take the growing problem of wildfires, for example. Human action that sought to repress wildfire indeed created a different landscape, a landscape prone to even more catastrophic wildfire.

Despite these differences, both the essentialist and the constructionist view of place are critical of a narrowly commodified view of nature and its meaning and use in everyday life. One way to think about this is to contrast the commodity or utilitarian view of nature with a socio-cultural view. In the commodity/utilitarian approach the goal is to understand and map the biophysical properties of resources and their associated economic and behavioral utilities. This involves identifying and quantifying individual preferences for biophysical and cultural attributes. The goal of the socio-cultural approach is to understand and map the social, symbolic, and/or expressive meaning of a place or landscape. This social constructionist view, while acknowledging utilitarian meaning of the landscape, in addition seeks to understand the culture and history of the people who regularly occupy and use a landscape. It also recognizes that place meanings are constructed through a dynamic process of "representation" (assigning meaning to a place through resource assessments and forest plans), which in turn guides action toward that place. This process continuously re-creates the place.

The difficulty for resource planning and decision making is that more than one representation (construction) is possible as various communities of place and interest compete to represent the meaning of a place according to their own systems of meaning. A utilitarian view may acknowledge that different parties assign different levels of utility to various resource commodities, but the socio-cultural view recognizes that meanings exist beyond those traditionally recognized as commodities (e.g., ritual, symbolism, identity). In addition, the socio-cultural approach recognizes that landscape meanings are momentary products of continuous social and political negotiation and contestation. Area plans, for example, are themselves social constructions of places that often enfranchise and empower the planners' constructions over

other stakeholders. Much of the political conflict in natural resource planning is over who's representation of the landscape will prevail.

## PLACE AND THE CONDUCT OF SCIENCE

Thus far I have argued that Enlightenment ideas and, in particular, the dynamic modernity they engender accentuate socio-cultural differences in systems of meaning, add to the multiplicity of representations of a place, and therefore exacerbate the problem of making these multiple social constructions commensurable. The utilitarian approach to natural resource management attempted to avoid these competing social constructions (and the politics of adjudicating among them) by seeking an objective, universal, and therefore "uncontestable" resolution in scientific management. Yet, an important critique of Enlightenment thought has centered on the nature and role of science and its narrow conception of reason. One cannot address the social construction of nature without widening the conception of what counts as knowledge.

A major theme of critiques of Enlightenment ideals, therefore, involves challenging the hegemony of "instrumental rationality" and "objectivism" as privileged modes of knowledge. For example, one characterization of the Enlightenment (attributable to Hegel) is that it was "insufficiently enlightened about the limitations of its own conception of reason" (Schmidt, 1998, p. 420). Within the Enlightenment, reason took on a narrow character emphasizing efficient means for reaching a given end. These ends were often directed at dominating nature; thus science became a tool for addressing technological questions. With science serving primarily utilitarian, universal, and reductionist ends, holistic and local knowledge was increasingly marginalized if not discredited altogether.

One response to these critiques has been to enlarge the philosophy of science to address something called critical pluralism (Patterson and Williams, 1998). Pluralism in science not only goes beyond positivist notions most of us learned in grade school, it goes beyond Kuhn's notion of scientific revolutions and suggests that different scientific paradigms do and should co-exist within a field or discipline. All paradigms have inherent boundaries and limitations that define and circumscribe the types of problems for which they are applicable. In place terms, what we take to be truth is often bounded and more local than our claims for it.

Taken together the narrowness of reason and the narrowness of meaning gives rise to a "placeless" universal orientation to the world that Sack (1992) describes as "the view from nowhere" (see Figure 1). For Sack, place constitutes a concrete, integrated focal point where the forces nature, social relations, and meaning overlap. This concrete, particular somewhere can be experienced, understood, and explained from multiple epistemological perspectives as illustrated by the vertical plane in the figure. Differing epistemological perspectives exist along a continuum from somewhere to virtually nowhere. What is traditionally thought of as good science involves the abstraction of a point of view from somewhere (the place of everyday experience) to a more remote, public, and distant point of view that is virtually nowhere. Abstraction makes it possible to perceive the world, "not as isolated bits of empirical information, but as a special case of the working out of a set of more abstract presuppositions" (Selltiz, et al. 1967, p. 471).

But such abstraction has two undesirable consequences that are highly relevant to post-utilitarian resource management. The first is that abstraction is a decontextualizing process that results in a loss or "thinning" of meaning. The everyday experience or meaning of place is easily overlooked in scientific and rational discourse. The second consequence of abstraction is that the process of moving from the highly subjective, but integrated experience of place to the more public, external, and objective experience tends to fragment knowledge along disciplinary and theoretical lines. Sack uses an inverted cone rising and expanding above the horizontal (spatial) plane to illustrate how the process of abstraction isolates and segments our understandings of places. Effective integration requires finding points of view between somewhere and nowhere. This has been described by Entrikin (1991) as the epistemological position of "betweenness" -- informed by scientific discourse, but also historically and spatially specific.
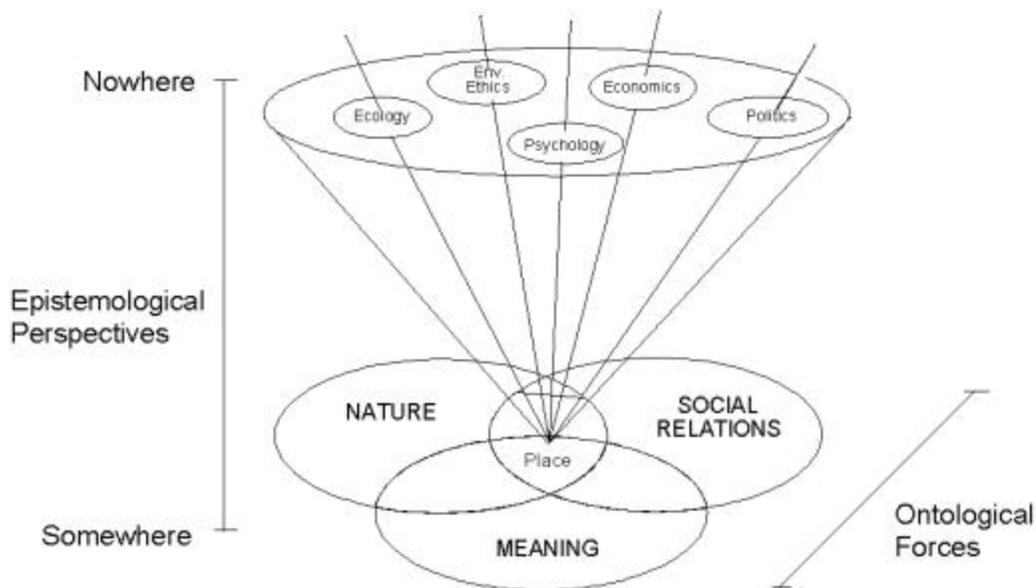
Figure 1. Sack's (1992) Relational Geographic Framework Applied to Natural Resource Management.

## PLACE AND THE ORDERING OF VALUES

To this point I have noted that the ideals of the Enlightenment marginalized "place" and the "particular" in favor of the universal and general and produced a commodified view of nature, a narrow conception of reason, and a scientifically privileged access to knowledge. The final discursive dimension of post-utilitarian resource management has to do with how society orders or chooses among alternative courses of action. In other words, a re-*placed* Enlightenment

favors an approach in which social institutions recognize and accept a pluralistic theory of value and the political nature of adjudicating among competing representations of place.

From a social constructionist perspective, the purpose of democratic processes must be to resolve differences in meanings and values (in fact, political adjudication of difference is the necessity of social construction – for if there were a transcendentally right way to construct the world there would be no need for politics). The problem in utilitarian resource management is we imagined science could eliminate politics and promoted "decision" sciences, as they seemed to offer the most rational methods for ordering values. Table 1 summarizes this decision science or expert approach and compares it to three alternatives to ordering values. In the expert approach some level of scientific consensus or understanding is sought which points to an instrumentally rational or "objective" resolution. In the pluralist model, social differences are ubiquitous and the best one can achieve is some optimal balancing of interests (compromise). The communitarian view presumes and seeks out some pre-existing unity or shared identity among community members that would order social values or preferences. Finally, the discursive model sees social differences and conflict as ubiquitous, makes no presumptions about value consensus, and postulates only episodic agreement. That is the discursive approach differs from the communitarian approach by not presuming any pre-existence of social unity. It emphasizes that politics is always a struggle among differences, not just of goals but systems of meaning, so the best one can hope for is occasional agreement after considerable struggle to understand differences. Consequently this approach aims for civic education through dialogue as much as any policy outcome.

Table 1. Comparison of Models of Democracy.

| Model of Democracy | Participants | Process/ Style | Outcome | Conflict/ Consensus | Rationality |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Expert | Individual Supplicants | Technical/ Scientific | Welfare Maximization (efficacy) | Scientific Understanding | Instrumental |
| Pluralist | Individual Supplicants | Negotiation/ Bargaining | Welfare Maximization (efficiency) | Balance of Interests | Instrumental |
| Communitarian | Community Members | Dialogue | Articulation of shared values | Discovery of Pre-existing Unity | Communicative |
| Agnostic/ Discursive | Citizens | Dialogue | Civic Education | Episodic Agreement | Communicative |

How then does place figure in the ordering of values? In part, place appears to contribute a degree of social unity necessary to constitute a polity. A minimal unity that makes possible and motivates political action is that people find "themselves in geographic proximity and economic interdependence such that the activities and pursuits of some affect the ability of others to conduct their own activities" (Young, 1996, p. 126). In other words, unity within the polity may simply be the result of people having to co-exist in a shared space even if they don't share much

else. For example, Healey (1997) characterizes collaborative planning as "making sense together while living differently."

In the end post-utilitarian resource management is most fundamentally about democratizing rationality. The narrow conception of rationality in the Enlightenment, as something technocratic, expert-driven, utilitarian, efficient and instrumental is enlarged within post-utilitarian resource management by a "communicative" rationality in which reasoning and reason giving is expanded to all citizens. It recognizes that: (1) communication across differences is not just between economic goals and social power, but between differences in *systems of meaning*; (2) methods of science provide many possible representations that compete with each other and with indigenous (local) or "non-scientific" representations; (3) rationality is an intersubjective, mutual understanding arrived at by particular people in particular times and places, and (4) planning is a social/communicative process for ordering values and competing senses of place instead of a technical process for identifying and selecting alternatives.

Figure 2 offers a more specific illustration of how senses of place figure into the ordering of values, in this case within the context of natural resource planning. The basic premise is that whatever social differences exist regarding the management of a resource, there is a shared concern for particular places. Thus, the basic task of any area planning process is to negotiate a "shared" sense of place (make sense together) as a beginning to the process of developing management objectives for that place. In this model public involvement is vigorously engaged throughout the process, from landscape assessment (mutual, shared understanding of the landscape) to the identification of plan alternatives and their objectives. This model gives particular emphasis to landscape assessment as a process of collecting local knowledge and context for characterizing the meaning and value of particular natural landscapes. At the same time, while expert/agency input and collaboration also compete with public or citizen knowledge and values pertaining to places, agencies also bring to bear larger scale external considerations on desired landscape conditions and management objectives, particularly in the form of laws and regulations that frame natural resource management and articulate the national interest in these lands. Recognizing that places are the products of continuous social construction, these senses of place are contested throughout the planning process as well as in feedback on planned and unplanned social action, which re-creates the landscape and leads to a future round of negotiation.

## CONCLUSIONS

In summary, varying academic discourses about place and "placelessness" represent critiques of the excesses of modernity and Enlightenment thought. These critiques have contributed to the emergence of post-utilitarian natural resource management in four fundamental ways. The first is to replace the mechanistic view of nature with a more holistic, integrated and contextual understanding that broadens spatial and temporal scales. Recognizing how humans create a sense of place adds a significant human role in making and using the landscape without reducing humans to one species among many. Viewing the land management process as the management of place incorporates both natural and social history and offers some common ground among competing interests without having to commit necessarily to certain philosophical views about human-nature relations (i.e., utilitarianism, romantic preservation, or radical ecology). The

second is to value nature as more than a repository of commodities.  In the long-standing instrumental paradigm, meanings were largely limited to tangible, commodity uses grounded in an economic model.  Viewing places as socially constructions recognizes greater plurality of values and meanings.  A social science perspective on place recognizes values that extend beyond the instrumental and biocentric to include the emotional and cultural, symbolic and historic.  The third is to recognize the changing assumptions about the nature of science and its role in natural resource decision making.  A fundamental tension exists between "using the best available science" and doing community based collaboration, between employing expertise from nowhere and gathering contextualized knowledge of somewhere.  The fourth is to acknowledge greater pluralism in the way society orders values.  In the utilitarian paradigm, decision-making authority was structured as a tension between science and managerial expertise on the one hand and market and political liberalism on the other hand.  In post-utilitarian management, decision making involves learning how to make sense together despite our differences.  This requires striking a better balance between individual liberty and social difference, on the one hand, and community and shared identity on the other hand.
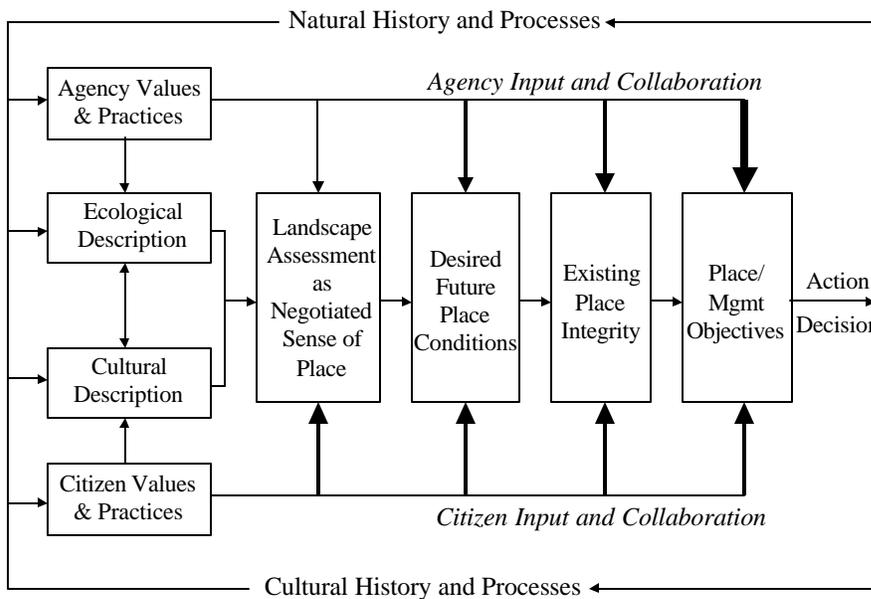


Figure 2. Place-Based Natural Resource Planning.

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