

Chapter 2—Pluralities of Place: A User’s Guide to Place Concepts, Theories, and Philosophies in Natural Resource Management

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Abstract

Place ideas are capturing increasing attention in recreation and natural resource management. But there are important and sometimes incompatible differences among the various concepts. In this paper I describe some of the reasons for the growing interest in place concepts and distinguish between four basic approaches: attitude, meaning, ethical, and political. My aim is to provide a guide to managers so they can better appreciate the implications of these different approaches. Finally, I try to highlight throughout how and why these ideas apply to recreation and natural resource management issues.

Keywords: Place concepts, place meanings, environmental philosophy.

Introduction

In the English language the word “place” is a common but complex term that, in recent years, is showing up more prominently in the technical vocabulary of natural resource management. Place concepts are finding their way into technical documents including the Forest Service’s *Handbook for Scenery Management* and a 2003 draft *Recreation Resource Management Plan Revision Technical Guide*. Likewise, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recently published *Community Culture and the Environment: A Guide to Understanding a Sense of Place*, and place ideas are popping up in texts on ecosystem management. Managers increasingly talk about managing for “sense of place” and “special places,” measuring “place attachment” among recreation visitors and community residents, and instituting collaborative “place-based planning” processes (Kruger and Jakes 2003).

In the resource management literature, “place” has surfaced along with “ecosystem,” “community,” and “landscape” as geographically tinged alternatives to the more traditional term “resource.” Professional interest in these ideas is growing even though their seemingly elusive, murky, and controversial nature would make

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them difficult to plug into quantitative decision models and geographic information systems (GIS) databases. Despite these difficulties, talk of place resonates surprisingly well with professionals and the public involved in the management of wildlands, regional tourism planning, as well as community issues of sprawl, open space preservation, and community development.

In this paper, I describe the underlying richness and variety of place ideas that are being discussed and debated in natural resource management and related fields. My goal is to provide a guide to managers so they can better distinguish among differing approaches to place that are sometimes hard to discern within the din of superficially similar terminology. I do not intend to give a taxonomic account of terminology, but rather explain some of the important assumptions underlying various formulations of place concepts. Along the way, I will try to address the question of why place ideas have captured so much attention and highlight how and why these ideas apply to natural resource issues.

My interest in a place perspective goes back to the late 1970s when I was working with colleagues at Utah State University on what we called “relationship to resource” as a way to understand outdoor recreation behavior (Williams and Schreyer 1981) and conflict (Jacob and Schreyer 1980). Drawing on geographer Yi-Fu Tuan’s (1974, 1977) writing about “topophilia” (love of place) and the “experience of place,” we suggested recreationists may at times develop “feelings of possession” for the resource, that these relationships can serve as powerful symbols of self-identity, and that with these strong ties and feelings for a resource come strongly held social norms and expectations about what kinds of uses and behaviors are deemed acceptable in that setting. Recreation conflict resulted, at least in part, when diverse users held strongly to different norms about what uses and behaviors are appropriate in a setting. Yet, as I suggested at the time, “few studies in wildland recreation recognize the importance of the meaning the user attaches to the place” and how these meanings developed over time (Williams 1980: 1).

Beyond the issue of conflict, what really caught my attention was how the idea of a relationship to resource contrasted with the dominant “goal-directed” ideas embedded in recreation management concepts such as the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS). I was troubled by the prevailing operational concepts of outdoor recreation in which activities and settings were viewed as collections of fungible (replaceable, substitutable) properties—properties that recreationists were thought to associate in varying degrees with their desired experience goals (hence the goal-directed model). In those days, outdoor recreation was understood in a way analogous to any other consumer good derived from the resource, in principle just as

fungible as timber, water, or forage. The very definition of “resource” dictates a capacity for finding or adapting properties to achieve some end or goal. Timber resources are ubiquitous, harvestable from virtually any place that supports forest vegetation. In contrast, the World Heritage status of Redwood National Park along California’s northern coast is testimony to its unique, nonfungible character. That places could be unique did not seem to square with the goal-directed model, where the benefits that accrue to recreation participants are presumed to be substitutable from one setting to another so long as the substitute site possesses similar attributes (Hendee and Burdge 1974).

I could not imagine a substitute for my favorite places in the Desolation Wilderness, a landscape I had come to know intimately through the many visits I had made in my teens and early twenties. I could not imagine John Muir thinking that Yosemite Valley was just a big granite-enclosed playground (indeed, for Muir it was God’s sacred temple). There must be some other explanation for many of the benefits and satisfactions I received from my recreational use of these places. But the dominant models of the day, based as they were in economics and consumer psychology, saw the setting as merely a collection of potentially attractive, but fungible features. The visitor’s history with that setting meant very little other than to suggest frequent visitors should be more satisfied because they would be more likely to have “accurate” expectations about the setting features.

As a recreation participant, the outdoor recreation resource did not strike me as some kind of supermarket of potential recreation opportunities organized, packaged, and managed by recreation resource professionals for public consumption as leisure experiences. Instead it was a collection of specific places, each with its own unique history and set of rituals and meanings. Not only did the concept of recreation opportunities fail to capture much of the meaning and significance that a resource held for me as a participant, my personal reflections were reinforced by an emerging critique of traditional goal-directed, consumer choice models within the field of consumer behavior research (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982, Ölander 1977, Olshavsky and Granbois 1979).

The essential difference between an approach to understanding recreation behavior from a resource and consumer perspective versus an approach potentially involving deep emotional and symbolic relationships to places is one of recognizing that at least in some important respects places are not fungible. Certainly, in many instances recreationists’ relationship to a resource may be such that they view it as a source of goods and services and therefore perceive places as ultimately tradable

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commodities. But any given place likely has some unique value and meaning (e.g., there is no substitute for the Grand Canyon experience), at least for some recreationists (fig. 1). The argument I have been making here is only that consumer relationships are not sufficient to capture the range of meanings and values recreationists are likely to assign to places, particularly those places that, from experience, they have come to know intimately. Although the place approach does not deny instrumental meanings, it is ultimately more inclusive and more easily accommodates the resource/commodity approach than the reverse.

In one guise or another, my research has continued to emphasize the relationship to place (in contrast to consumer/goal-directed/resource models) as a basis of outdoor recreation participation and choice. The basic idea I have been exploring is that people value their relationships to leisure places just as they might value enduring involvements with certain people or particular “free time” activities. We choose recreation places not merely because they are useful settings for pursuing outdoor recreation activities, but to convey the very sense of who we are.

The Popularity of “Place”

Interest in place ideas extends well beyond the academic margins of recreation resource management. Even in the broader culture of scientific management, which has historically dominated natural resources, such seemingly difficult-to-quantify concepts have become a popular refrain (see Beatley and Manning 1997, Grumbine 1992, Hansson and Wackernagel 1999, Waage 2001). Although place ideas have



Figure 1—The Grand Canyon experience represents a unique value and meaning.

been widely used in geography, architecture, and regional planning since the early 1970s, the growing emphasis on collaborative ecosystem management has amplified interest in place concepts within the natural resources field. For that matter, the popularity of place is more than a recent fad of academic rumination: place ideas also have currency within the wider public imagination (Kunstler 1993, Spretnak 1997). There are a number of societal and resource management reasons for their growing appeal.

A leading sociological explanation is a general reaction against the commodified view of nature that has dominated our modern, technological society (Macnaughten and Urry 1998). Some see a broad public disenchantment with the tendency to reduce places to mere resources (Spretnak 1997). Treating nature as a collection of products or commodities to be sold, or isolating properties of the environment in order to study them scientifically leaves many people, lay and professional, with a sense that the larger whole, the “place” itself, has somehow been lost along the way. This was much of the reaction described in the Forest Service’s own critique of the first round of forest planning (Larsen et al. 1990). Although ecosystem management attempts to put the silvicultural/forest management science of the first round of forest planning into a broader spatial and historical context, it has not fully addressed the richness of human meanings and relationships to the land that people express and want to see represented in the planning process. Place, in contrast, is seen as encompassing both natural and social history.

A second, sociological explanation for the increasing discussion of place can be found in public angst about globalization and the accelerating pace of change in society. The look and layout of most American communities has undergone rapid change in recent decades. Concerns about the character and quality of places have increased with the spread of mass culture and consumption through entertainment and retail goliaths like Time-Warner² and Wal-Mart. To many people, the social, technological, and economic forces of globalization appear to have weakened local distinctiveness. In addition, relatively inexpensive transportation and new information technologies mean people can experience more parts of the world through international trade, travel, and the media.

Ironically, these forces of homogenization have made place more important, not less (Harvey 1996, Mander and Goldsmith 1996). With the onset of globalization, what were once taken-for-granted, subconscious meanings of a place now

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² The use of trade or firm names in this publication is for reader information and does not imply endorsement by the U.S. Department of Agriculture of any product or service.

come to the surface and seem threatened by nearly every proposed change to the local landscape. Efforts to introduce new land uses—whether theme parks, prisons, wildlife preserves, timber harvests, land exchanges, or shopping malls—become symbols of external threats to the local sense of place (Appleyard 1979). These proposed new uses express the sense of place defined by the outsider (e.g., the scientist, government official, or special interest group) and thus represent the power of the outsider over the local.

At the same time that globalization threatens local control over place, it invites more and more stakeholders to make claims on what a place means and how it should be used (Massey 1993). In other words, a more global (pluralist) culture supports a more expansive set of place meanings. Ironically, some of these more distant claims may be to appreciate a place (e.g., as wilderness or a world heritage designation) in ways that go beyond traditionally prescribed meanings for commodity development. In this way, globalization is sometimes seen as a benign force for the protection of sense of place otherwise threatened by indigenous or corporate exploitation rather than a dangerous and destabilizing force reshaping places from afar (Williams 2002b).

A final and related reason is simply that the meanings of many remote recreation places have become more apparent, complex, and thickly layered with intensification of public use. A sense of place is partly about building up a personal history with a locale. In the early days of public lands management, relatively few people had direct experience visiting specific places on national forests, rangelands, and parks. They were largely unknown and unused in the modern sense. With few claims and norms for how a place ought to be used, both users and managers had more latitude to define appropriate use and meaning. Today, with the expanding wildland-urban interface and large metropolitan populations within easy reach of wildlands, there is far greater potential for competing senses of place to be established and fought over. Where only hearty hikers and anglers once tread, a host of relative newcomers (off-highway vehicle [also known as OHV] users, mountain bikers, target shooters) now compete for access (fig. 2). These high-powered and high-tech newcomers bring with them conflicting ideas about what constitutes desirable or acceptable use and establish their own attachment to and sense of the place.

Under the earlier conditions, it was easier to manage places as settings or opportunities to fulfill specific goal-directed experiences. Because fewer visitors had much history in the landscape, and the variety of users was smaller, managers



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Figure 2—Off-highway vehicle users now compete for access to public places.

had more latitude to negotiate meanings and norms for use and to zone potentially competing uses. As places become increasingly accessible and popular among a wider diversity of users and interests, it has become much more difficult to manage for any particular experience on a given piece of ground. Now, in this era of high-intensity use among a greater plurality of users, the concept of place helps managers recognize that users form allegiances to specific places (with specific meanings attached) as well as norms of appropriate use and management. These meanings sometimes can accommodate a wide diversity of other users and sometimes not.

Four Approaches to Place in Natural Resource Management

As implied above, the popularity of place concepts comes, in part, from people drawing on varying place ideas to bolster a particular view of how a place should be developed, managed, or preserved. But what at first appear to be common or compatible approaches, may represent diverse, if not contradictory, viewpoints (Patterson and Williams 2005). Thus, it is important for managers to recognize some of the variations in use and meaning of these concepts. In this section, I will highlight some of these differences by describing four more or less distinct approaches (or discourses) underlying the application of place ideas to the management of natural resources. But before I begin, let me recap some features that most place concepts tend to share in common.

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At a basic level, most place concepts emphasize a holistic and spatially and temporally explicit view of resources. Just as ecosystem management attempts to put traditional forest management science into a broader spatial and historical context, place and sense of place ideas pay more attention to the human or social history of a particular locale. Among academic geographers, the term “place” is also used to denote a more holistic notion in comparison to a more abstract notion of space or geographic location (e.g., in a coordinate or Euclidean space). Space is little more than location or container. It is only when we begin to fill it up with particular events and meanings does a space become place. Each place, thus, is unique from every other place in the particular pattern of events and meanings that come to be associated with it.

Beyond a general desire for a more holistic and historical understanding of place, however, my attempt to organize place discourses into four categories is meant to emphasize the differences among them that often go overlooked. Still, although there are some incompatibilities that need to be recognized, these discourses are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and hybrid views are possible.

Place as an Attitude Object

The most straightforward approach is to think of place or, more typically, place attachment as something akin to an attitude toward a geographic locale or resource (Jorgensen and Stedman 2001, Stedman 2002). Attitudes are assessments of whether some object or behavior is considered a good or bad thing. For example, a person may hold attitudes toward an agency, a political candidate, a consumer product, a behavior (e.g., smoking), or a concept (e.g., wilderness or wildfire). These attitudes are usually built upon various beliefs about the object (e.g., smoking causes cancer, wildfires damage watersheds) and presumably determine one’s behavior toward the object.

Attitudes involve strength as well as valence (positive or negative reaction). Thus, there is a natural tendency to measure the strength of individuals’ attachment toward any particular resource. Much of the work on measuring place attachment in recreation and tourism implicitly or explicitly follows the attitude tradition. A common approach to place attachment has been to build on concepts (e.g., consumer loyalty and product involvement) found in literature on consumer behavior (Bricker and Kerstetter 2000; Jones et al. 2000; Kyle et al. 2003, 2004; Warzecha and Lime 2000; Williams and Vaske 2003; Williams et al. 1992). Although this does not explicitly draw from attitude theory, consumer loyalty and product

involvement can be considered a kind of “brand” attitude. In any case, Stedman and colleagues have made an explicit plea to study place attachment as an attitude (Jorgensen and Stedman 2001, Stedman 2002).

In natural resource management, place ideas are sometimes used to characterize one type of attitude among many potential attitudes or beliefs people might hold toward a resource (Williams and Stewart 1998). For example, the term “sense of place” is sometimes used to describe varying degrees of specialness or authenticity of a place. In this case, landscapes can be compared and ranked by the strength or integrity of their sense of place and management actions evaluated by how this sense of place is enhanced or diminished (see also the later discussion of place as a philosophy of environmental ethics).

There is important value in the attitude approach, in part, because it ties place attachment to well-established concepts and methods in social psychology. For example, social psychological research has developed relatively direct methods for measuring the strength of attitudes and provides insights into how attitudes form and how they change. It also makes place attachment highly compatible with the traditional consumer-utility (benefit) approaches to natural resource management—strength of attachment becomes one factor in a multifactor consumer decision framework.

In terms of managing natural resources, place attachment is also attractive because it attempts to quantify the strength of connections between people and geographically specific places directly rather than trying to establish such connections indirectly in terms of how well they fit or function in satisfying specific recreation goals. This is significant in two ways. First, people often care passionately about the management of specific sites in ways not easily captured as in an inventory of fungible properties. Place attachment reminds resource managers that the public is involved with specific places under their jurisdiction, not just land uses classified as one type of opportunity or another to be allocated to various uses during a planning cycle. Secondly, place attachment reminds managers of something the consumer approach often misses. People not only evaluate products and services as satisfactory or unsatisfactory, they come to cherish some as prized possessions and symbols or markers of identity (Belk 1988).

Still, it is debatable whether place attachment is best thought of as an attitude toward a place. The question is whether place attitudes adequately characterize the relationships recreationists hold toward certain places. At one level, place attachment has all the hallmarks of an attitude in that it involves both valence and

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strength and it does little harm to treat it as such. But part of the reason for considering place attachment is to address something deeper and more fundamental than is typically associated with attitudes. People do not usually characterize their relationships to cherished objects, home, or family in terms of attitudes. To say that I have a favorable attitude toward my wife and children would seem to degrade the emotional intensity of these relationships. In any case, even if place attachment is something broader than an attitude, it is certainly likely to predict or explain more specific attitudes toward the place.

In my judgment, an attitude approach to place does not do justice to the broader concerns that motivate professional and public interest in the concept of place. Something important is lost when place attachment is reduced to an attitude. The idea of attitude tends to be narrowly evaluative and judgmental and lacks the holistic, emotive, and contextual qualities of the place idea that was part of its original appeal (Altman and Low 1992). Likewise, place as attitude poses little challenge to the dominant utilitarian (commodified) view of nature in which natural landscapes (places) are reduced to a collection of parts.

Place as Relationship and Meaning

The second approach involves the relatively straightforward recognition of a broader range of meanings that people associate with a place than with a resource (Williams and Patterson 1996). As resource management has moved toward recognizing more holistic, systemic, and contextual qualities, it is increasingly concerned with capturing the full range of meanings the public ascribes to places—meanings that may differ widely across individuals and social groups and evolve over time. In the long-standing tradition of utilitarian resource management, the legitimate meaning of a resource was necessarily limited to the tangible and fungible commodities that it could provide. The value of a resource was defined by the uses or products that could flow from it. Even uses that we sometimes think of as “intangible” such as recreation were rendered more tangible by thinking of them as products or services supplied by the resource.

The term “meaning” is used to convey a deeper notion than attitude by emphasizing the “relationship” between a person or group and the place. The notion of relationship implies past experience or history with the site as well as connectivity or identification. In addition, whereas attitude necessarily occurs in the individual mind, meaning often refers to a shared or collective belief. In effect, emphasizing meaning expands the narrower psychological approach of attitudes by recognizing

the sociocultural nature of (often intangible) ideas, symbols, beliefs, and values that characterize the relationship between the person or group and a place.

Our relationship to a place serves as a testimonial to who we are. This can occur at both an individual and cultural level (Williams 2000). At an individual level, a place like Desolation Wilderness in California is an indelible part of me, an expression of both my personal and professional interests. At a cultural level, we designate places as wilderness or national parks as a way to sanctify them as special places marking important events in our collective American history. At either level, social interactions, shared experiences and stories, and broad cultural narratives are important in creating, modifying, and transmitting place meanings within a population.

In the place-as-meaning approach, sense of place sometimes refers to the intangible meanings and symbols that are hard to recognize or articulate (and hard to quantify), especially if one is unfamiliar with the place or is an “outsider” to the social world that associates particular meanings with the place (Hester 1985, Williams and Stewart 1998). As an example, those schooled in the Anglo-professional culture of resource management often have a hard time recognizing place meanings of people from minority/ethnic communities (Williams and Carr 1993). But even the smaller differences between long-time locals and recent-arriving managers who otherwise share cultural backgrounds may create barriers to understanding the meaning of places. One of the features of ecosystem management, for example, is to give greater consideration to local ecological knowledge. Place effectively extends this edict to include local social and symbolic meanings. This is not always easy, as even insiders sometimes may lack full awareness of these qualities until some event or proposal threatens them (Hester 1985).

An approach emphasizing place meanings, particularly shared cultural meanings, is sometimes distinguished from the idea of place attachment or place identity. Most places have shared meanings, but the intensity with which individuals hold or identify with those meanings likely varies. Gettysburg National Battlefield, for example, is rich in meaning for America society, but some Americans identify more strongly with these meanings than others. For some people, it may be that their ancestors fought in the Civil War. For others who may be history buffs, they take great interest in knowing the details of the events that occurred there. As managers, we generally need to understand the range and variety of meanings the public assigns to a place, as well as how their intensity differs across stakeholders and constituencies (Brandenburg and Carroll 1995).

As managers, if we think of our traditional tasks of resource inventory as efforts to identify and map landscape meanings, the place perspective argues for employing a wider conception of meaning. Resource maps, in effect, describe how certain kinds of meaning are spatially distributed. Natural resource management has sought, with considerable success, to map certain tangible forms of meaning (e.g., commodity and amenity uses). As intangible meanings (e.g., cultural/symbolic, expressive, and even spiritual meanings) have become increasingly legitimized within the ecological or systems concept of resource management, the scope of resource mapping needs to be similarly expanded.

Although in theory, meaning can be mapped like other spatial properties, the problem has been that the more intangible meanings, by definition, leave few, if any, physical indicators, behavioral evidence, or cultural markers in the landscape to tell us they exist. Thus for managers to identify the full range of meanings requires an expanded set of inventory techniques (for promising examples see Brown 2005, Eisenhauer et al. 2000).

Meanings can be likened to stories about places rather than physical properties of places. The job of the resource manager is to learn about these stories and to recognize when different groups of people have different and sometimes conflicting stories. Relatively passive approaches to gathering these stories would include identifying narratives, documents, and histories about a place or consulting key informants including long-time managers (Davenport and Anderson 2005). More active approaches would be to engage the public in constructing and negotiating their various stories through various forms of collaborative planning itself (Kruger and Shannon 2000, see also the discussion below on place as a sociopolitical process).

Implicit in the place-as-meaning approach is the controversial idea of social constructionism (cf., Cronon 1996, Soulé and Lease 1995). To critics like Soulé and Lease, a social constructionist view of nature implies that people can assign a virtually infinite range of meaning to a place, and, therefore, physical or ecological reality would seem to have little influence on what a place means and how it should be managed (see also Stedman 2003). Social constructionism (i.e., meaning is not inherent in a thing, but a product of social convention) strikes some ecologists as dangerous relativism, giving license to society to make places however they choose, thereby threatening ecological systems. Ironically, others see the study of resource meanings and values as often insufficiently socially constructed and little different from the usual attitudes, perceptions, and motives that recreation managers have

traditionally catalogued (Stokowski 2002). In this view, traditional social psychological and economic notions of individually held attitudes and values are seen as insufficiently “social” in origin.

Controversy aside, in some ways the place-as-meaning approach is among the least prescriptive of the various place discourses. At one level, it merely acknowledges that place meanings exist and are often diverse, malleable, and continuously created and contested by people (including scientists and resource managers). I see it mostly as suggesting that different kinds of meanings (from traditionally recognized commodity meanings to the more elusive emotional and spiritual meanings) all have something to offer in our understanding of relationships to places. Although place-as-meaning need not advocate that any particular meanings should rule, it does help managers to see that places are complex and contested and that managers play a critical role in the ongoing give-and-take of place creation. At the same time, the fact that people do contest place meanings gives rise to philosophical arguments and political wrangling aimed at validating some meanings over others as I shall discuss below.

Place as Environmental Ethics

The third approach invokes place ideas as moral or ethical claims for protecting or restoring the presumably genuine meaning (character or personality) of a place. Accordingly, every place is presumed to have some authentic ecologically or culturally defined essence, some true and timeless character, often threatened (if not already destroyed) by larger distant forces (e.g., environmental degradation, modernization, and globalization).

This moral dialogue also is popular among certain environmental philosophers and scientific ecologists. Representing both the philosophical and ecological perspective, Grumbine (1992) suggested that humans once had an authentic relationship to place that has “atrophied” under modern modes of life. We have become alienated from our true relationship to nature, place, and community. Modernity has bred within us an “anthropocentric arrogance” and failure “to adapt to the ecological conditions that limit human existence” (Grumbine 1992: 245). Likewise, these arguments resonate with some ecologists because they appear to provide normative guidelines for how society ought to treat landscapes—that is, by following some indigenous ecological pattern (Samson and Knopf 1996).

Moral arguments also come from architects, planners, and a variety of social critics. Some planners and urban designers condemn forms of commercial development and mass culture for homogenizing the built landscape (e.g., Kunstler 1993).

For other social critics, the issue is often one of preserving some vestige of traditional community against the threat of large-scale forces of economic restructuring and the bureaucratic state (Mander and Goldsmith 1996). Within the design professions (e.g., landscape architecture) and among restoration ecologists there is a tendency to reify aesthetic and/or ecological standards for landscape management based on a presumed integrity with respect to a natural, historical, ecological range of conditions (Norberg-Schultz 1980, McGinnis et al. 1999). The core idea here is that each place, community, landscape, or ecosystem possesses some inherent true character. Proper management does not destroy that character, but protects it or, if necessary and possible, restores it.

There are a variety of social and environmental movements founded on this underlying premise of alienation from the modern world (for a discussion, see Williams and Van Patten 2006). Bioregionalism is one example of a place-based philosophy that harkens back to a more sustainable relationship to places (Flores 1994). The bioregional model envisions an ecological utopia of small-scale societies as an alternative to the large-scale processes favored by global, industrial capitalism. Bioregionalists believe there is an authentic biocentric (natural) way of acting and dwelling in the world, a true sense of place to be discovered or recovered. Bioregionalists mix ecological science and environmental ethics to argue that society should be organized around decentralized natural or “organic” regions. Politically they emphasize decentralized, nonhierarchical social and political systems. The guiding principle is that nature should determine the political, economic, and social life of communities. The conscientious study of nature can guide us in organizing human settlements and ways of life.

Just as some environmental philosophers revere bioregional living on the basis of an organic interpretation of regionalism, communitarians tout the virtues of small local communities on the basis of their presumed thicker ties of tradition and custom as an antidote to modernism and globalization (Bell 1993). For some, the ecological relation to nature is closely tied to communitarian ideals of civic virtues. For example, communitarians such as Kemmis argue that decisionmaking in the public sphere should depend less on a set of procedures, laws, regulations, or bureaucracies and more on human virtues and patterns of relationships—“the set of practices which enables a common inhabiting of a place” (Kemmis 1990: 122). Rural life is presumed to be the good life in need of protection. Within natural resource management, some versions of place-based planning draw on the assumption that local decisionmaking is necessarily better (Kemmis 2001).

The presumption that places are given by nature is challenged by some geographers and environmental philosophers (Harvey 1996). Hayward (1994), for example, identified three problems with bioregional admonitions to follow nature and seek local self-sufficiency. First, there is little evidence from human history to expect that decentralized bioregional/communitarian societies will necessarily respect the positive values of human diversity, democracy, liberty, and justice. Second, there is the problem of distributive justice. The various bioregions, unfortunately, are not uniformly or equally endowed with resources. It is much easier to create a local, communal self-sufficiency in a lush productive landscape than a barren, impoverished one. Deciding who gets to live in a given region is no small problem. Finally, bioregional self-sufficiency ignores the interdependence and hierarchical structure of ecosystems. Actions in one bioregion may have significant impacts on adjacent ones. Nor is decentralization necessarily the most efficient for nature. Assuming anything approaching the present world population, it may not be realistic to believe that a decentralized bioregional strategy is likely to lessen human impact on the biosphere.

The main reason here for highlighting place as an environmental ethic is that managers need to be mindful of how they describe and employ place ideas. The moral arguments for some sort of pre-given sense of place animate specific views for how society should value place, nature, or landscape. As I noted earlier in discussing reasons for elevated interest in place ideas, sense of place is sometimes invoked as a way to correct what is perceived to be an overly modern or mechanistic view of nature (nature as a storehouse of commodities).

Although some people use place ideas in strongly prescriptive ways, this is by no means universal. As we have seen, not all place ideas are calls for preservation or restoration of some “authentic” sense of place. Rather they may represent an expanded understanding of place meanings, without endorsing some meanings over others (the place-as-meaning approach). In the end, however, any attempt to expand the definition of what meanings should count in a land management decision will necessarily open up resource management to a larger political debate.

Place as Sociopolitical Process

The fact that people not only assign diverse meanings to place, but often ground meanings in a moral language of ecology or community, implies a political dimension to how place ideas affect natural resource management. Recent years have seen a growing interest in the idea of the politics of place (Cheng et al. 2003, Kemmis 1990, Stokowski 2002, Williams 2002a, Yung et al. 2003) to account for the fact

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that different groups of people make competing claims on the meaning of a place. Likewise, place attachments and sense of place are necessarily political because place meanings serve to define social group differences (serve to define “us” and “them,” locals and outsiders). And not unlike bioregional philosophy, any claim on what belongs to a place (what kinds of meaning and practices are deemed authentic to the place) is often invoked to assert power and authority over a place. Recreation use involves making and resisting claims about places, about what a place means or what constitutes the true character of sense of it. Jacob and Schreyer’s (1980) original work on conflict recognized that conflicts are often over different relationships to the resource. The politics of place is a more up-to-date way to describe these conflicting relationships to resources.

Once resource managers begin to recognize places as repositories of meaning, they must also come to terms with the fact that more than one set of meanings is possible as various communities of place and interest compete to represent the meaning of a place according to their own systems of meaning. Historically, the utilitarian view of places recognized that different parties assign different levels of utility to various resource commodities, but that the potential commodities themselves (the meanings) were inherent properties of the resource. In contrast, the sociopolitical view recognizes that meanings exist beyond those traditionally acknowledged as commodities (e.g., ritual, symbolism, identity) and that there may be little consensus on meanings among stakeholders. In addition, the sociopolitical approach must admit that landscape meanings are but a temporary snapshot of a continuous social and political process of negotiation and contestation. Much of the political conflict in natural resource planning is over whose meanings for the landscape will prevail. Resource plans themselves constitute a sense of place that often elevate and empower the planners’ meanings over other stakeholders (Appleyard 1979).

As I have alluded to in contrasting the different place discourses, one of the basic ways that different senses of place provoke conflict is over whether place meanings (or sense of place) are seen as innate in a particular landscape (and therefore an ecological or social norm worthy of protection and/or restoration) or constructed in the minds of users (and therefore open to varying interpretations that are often contested by various enthusiasts of one sort or another). This is also sometimes described as whether there are true, authentic senses of place or whether place meanings are entirely constructed through experience and social interaction and subject to political or administrative adjudication. The former would imply that

management should endeavor to uncover and perpetuate the authentic place or in some cases restore lost places to their former authentic state. The latter says that places are subject to multiple competing claims, but no claims of sense of place can be validated on their conformance to an authentic normative prescription without politics.

From the standpoint of managing public lands, I favor the latter, political view for the simple reason that as public servants, managers, and natural resource planners, our job is not to tell people what the authentic sense of place is, but to facilitate a public dialogue as to what it can and should be. To take the other course and suggest that there is a right and true sense of place is to advocate or endorse a particular management regime based on our presumed technical or professional capacity to identify and prescribe the correct sense of place on behalf of society and goes against the trend toward more collaborative stakeholder involvement in decisionmaking. This amounts to perpetuating our untenable legacy of the technical view of natural resource decisionmaking.

Conclusions

Different theories of place (attitudinal, relational, ethical, and political) tend also to emphasize different kinds of meanings (see Williams and Patterson 1999 for a taxonomy of place meanings). Some are seen as “inherent” in the human-nature connection, others are seen as products of culture and experience. In other words, meanings differ based on the degree to which we assume meaning is biologically determined, objective, and generalized versus socially constructed, subjective, and contextual.

The core idea behind thinking of resources as places is to recognize that people form varied and complex relationships (uses, meanings, values) with specific locales. These relationships often extend beyond the kinds of relationships we normally imagine in a consumer’s relationship with a commodity, to include emotional, symbolic, and even spiritual meanings that have little direct correspondence with the usefulness of the setting for some activity. In other words, places are not merely useful for delivering specific recreation benefits. They also embody a sense of meaning and identity for the user that is built up as the user establishes experiences and memories in that place. The challenge for managers is that we are unlikely to discover, let alone map, most place meanings as if they are strewn about on the landscape waiting for us to come by and “inventory” them. In contrast to our resource training, it is difficult to identify meanings through some “archeological” technique that looks for evidence on the ground (e.g., physical properties) that

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would reliably indicate specific meanings. Rather, the meanings of each place are revealed in the stories people tell about it (fig. 3). Knowledge of place meanings requires delving into the human history of use, settlement, or occupation of the landscape.

Not only are meanings cloaked in stories that require some effort to uncover, but our pluralist society produces competing stories or senses of a given place. Thus, a second important idea behind thinking of resources as places is to recognize that whereas managers may have some (often important) influence over what a place means, the meanings themselves are not subject to the kinds of rational control envisioned in 20th-century traditions of scientific management. Again the commodity metaphor breaks down. Unlike managers of private markets, managers of “places” do not really control the types of recreation resource products “on the market” for users to choose among based on their particular interests and values. Instead, the individual and collective acts of recreation and other users or stakeholders, as well as resource managers, make (and sometimes resist) competing claims on a place. For managing public places, there is no single or inherently correct sense of place that trumps other senses of places. Negotiating among different senses of public place is an essentially political process, one that can be informed by collaborative efforts by stakeholders and managers to identify and possibly map social differences in uses, meanings, and values of geographically specific places.



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Figure 3—The meanings of each place are revealed in the stories people tell about it.

As managers, we face an ever-increasing plurality of contested place meanings and, in my view, we are unlikely to discover a scientific basis for affirming one set of meanings over another. Thus, a source of much confusion in discussions of place and attempts to integrate place ideas into management is the inevitable mixing of **prescriptive** arguments for how places ought to be managed (which meanings ought to prevail) with more **descriptive** or process-oriented statements that merely suggest that managers need to be open and receptive to a wider arena of public meanings and values that attend to a place. In other words, management needs to recognize the potential for competing claims or senses of place while at the same time remaining open to a wider array of meanings and recognizing all claims (even their own) as potentially prescriptive arguments for a particular sense of place. The challenge, as Appleyard (1979) cautioned several decades ago, is that environmental planners often consciously or unconsciously try to impose their own meanings on the environment, meanings that differ from public stakeholders.

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