

BUILDING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES USING SENSE OF PLACE INDICATORS IN THREE HUDSON RIVER VALLEY, NY, TOURISM DESTINATIONS: AN APPLICATION OF THE LIMITS OF ACCEPTABLE CHANGE PROCESS

Laura E. Sullivan

State University of New York
College of Environmental Science and Forestry
LESULL01@SYR.EDU

Rudy M. Schuster

State University of New York at time of research
Currently with U.S. Geological Survey

Diane M. Kuehn

State University of New York

Cheryl S. Doble

State University of New York

Duarte Morais

Pennsylvania State University

Abstract.—This study explores whether measures of residents' sense of place can act as indicators in the Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) process to facilitate tourism planning and management. Data on community attributes valued by residents and the associated values and meanings were collected through focus groups with 27 residents in three Hudson River Valley, New York, communities. Data analysis found that strength of sense of place changes over time, as do the meanings and values associated with places. The quantification of sense of place required to establish limits makes it difficult to incorporate evolving place meanings. Therefore, sense of place scales are not indicators that easily conform to the LAC framework. Tourism development proposals that alter places may alter place meanings. Understanding residents' sense of place is the first step in establishing a framework for evaluating such proposals.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Many rural coastal communities face challenges in maintaining stable local economies and depend on recreation and tourism as a basis for economic viability. Local residents often find that nature-based recreational opportunities, and the local characteristics related to

attractive and livable communities, are marketed to tourists. Residents can identify positive and negative impacts of tourism in their communities (Harrill 2004, Andereck et al.2005). Tourism planning and development can physically alter places of personal value to residents (Hester 1985), damaging the unique appeal of individual communities for both residents and visitors. Therefore, it is critical to identify and sustain community attributes that hold special meaning for residents. Sustainability is defined as the balance among ecological, economic, and social values (Hart 1999). In communities that depend on natural resources for place meanings and tourism, the limits of ecological processes to renew natural resources establish the parameters of sustainability. Sustainable tourism meets the above definition of sustainability and uses a public participation process to inform planning and management decisions (Ionnides 2001, Cole 2006).

1.1 Sense of Place

Identification of place meanings stems from the concept of sense of place. Sense of place is the meaning and emotion humans assign to geographic spaces (Stedman 2003). Sense of place involves awareness about a place and the attributes that differentiate it from other places (Tuan 1980). Historical, cultural, social, ecological, and physical attributes may all contribute to the creation of place meanings.

This study assumes that the three study communities (Beacon, Cold Spring, and Kingston, NY) derive place meanings from at least one shared attribute, the Hudson River. All three municipalities are riverfront communities located in the mid-Hudson Valley. The Hudson River may contribute to distinct place meanings, behaviors, and emotions in each community. For example, in one community the riverfront may serve as a relaxing, park-like setting. In another community, the riverfront may be a busy commercial and recreational venue for boaters.

Stedman (1999) posited that sense of place measures can be operationalized as quantitative indicators of community sustainability, but he emphasized the need to understand underlying meanings as well (2003). MacKendrick and Parkins (2004) used a quantitative measure of place attachment, defined as “bonds with places,” in a study of sustainability indicators for forest-dependent communities. The antecedents of place attachment have been explored in residential settings (Brown et al. 2004, Manzo and Perkins 2006). Quantitative indicators of place attachment have been linked to participation in community revitalization efforts (Manzo and Perkins 2006). Sense of place is socially constructed; the qualitative approach used in this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the meanings underlying sense of place in relation to tourism destination development.

Indicators provide information about a community's progress toward sustainability; they do not, in themselves, make a community more sustainable (Hart 1999). To achieve sustainability, indicators must be part of a process, such as LAC, that guides planning and management. Therefore, the variables that affect each indicator must be understood in order to link changes in indicator data to management actions. For example, planners and managers must know the antecedents of place attachment in a community in order to encourage increased place attachment. The following section describes LAC, a multi-step approach to achieving sustainability that includes the use of indicators. The purpose of this study was to determine whether qualitative indicators of sense of place can be identified and applied to tourism planning and management strategies using an LAC process.

1.2 Limits of Acceptable Change

LAC is a nine-step process designed to guide management decision-making, thereby enhancing the ecological and social conditions of a place. It is one of several approaches designed for outdoor recreation management that have been applied to tourism destinations. Ahn et al. (2002) used the LAC approach to assess sustainable tourism development on the Texas coast. Banks (2003) found that the LAC approach best expressed native resident perspectives in research

that compared three different approaches to tourism development carrying capacity. LAC is intended to identify and mitigate human impacts by determining achievable and desirable ecological and social conditions, analyzing current conditions, identifying management actions, and monitoring and evaluating management (Stankey et al. 1985). The objective of LAC management actions is to improve or maintain current conditions so they align with the achievable and desirable conditions. This study concentrated on step 1 (Identify area issues and concerns) and step 3 (Select indicators of resource and social conditions), with a focus on sense of place. The remaining LAC steps are outside the scope of this study.

Manning (2007) described the necessity of incorporating social norms into management decisionmaking. LAC explicitly includes social conditions in the analysis (Stankey et al. 1985). This study, with its focus on sense of place, explored constructed conditions. Incorporating local residents' values into management decisions can enhance planners' abilities to maintain communities where residents want to remain and facilitate the engagement of the host communities in the tourism industry; both of these endeavors are critical for long-term sustainability.

2.0 METHODS

Six focus-group sessions lasting approximately 1 ½ hours and facilitated by the primary author were held in June of 2008 to collect sense of place data from residents. Twenty-seven residents from Cold Spring, Beacon, and Kingston participated. The number of participants in each session varied from two to six. Sessions were recorded with audio equipment and recordings were transcribed verbatim. At the end of each session, participants completed short evaluation forms that included demographic questions.

The focus groups solicited information from community residents by creating a dialogic space. Dialogic space is an environment in which individuals can learn through open, nonjudgmental discussion (Schneekloth and Shibley 1995). Dialogue requires participants to collaborate, unlike an adversarial debate in which individuals argue their positions and listen in order to undermine the position of others.

2.1 Focus Group Design

A focus group protocol with specific questions was prepared to guide the discussions (Stewart et al. 2007). Nontechnical terms were substituted for theoretical terms, as necessary. For example, participants were asked about the value of places and resources in the community, rather than sense of place. Focus group participants had the opportunity to brainstorm responses together. Follow-up questions were designed to extract the meaning given by residents to community attributes.

2.2 Participant Selection

Potential participants were contacted using a snowball sampling technique (Bogdan and Biklen 2007). One or two municipal employees in each community acted as gatekeepers, who provided the names of individuals and organizations that might be interested in participating. The snowball technique was selected because it generates a nonrandom sample of people interested in community involvement. These individuals are likely to be better able (and more willing) to participate than a randomized sample from the general public. A limitation of this method was that the focus groups did not include representatives of all community interests. A further limitation of this study was the small number of participants. The results reflect only the participants' perceptions and cannot be generalized to a larger population.

2.3 Data Analysis

The transcripts were analyzed to identify common and repeated themes using an emergent coding process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). During transcription of the audio recordings, initial themes began to emerge. In further data analysis, repeated terms were identified and highlighted. Those terms were clustered and coded based on shared or related meaning. The co-authors reviewed the transcripts and codes to verify the themes.

3.0 RESULTS

Two themes, the dynamism of sense of place and influences on sense of place, are discussed in the following sections. Other themes identified in the data analysis are outside the scope of this paper. Strength of sense of place changed over time, as did the

meanings and values associated with specific places in the three Hudson River Valley (HRV) communities. The evolution of sense of place over time followed similar patterns in the three communities. A social and economic heyday occurred in the region around 1900, followed by disruptions in sense of place as industry and tourism declined, resulting in loss of employment and out-migration. In recent decades, the local economies diversified, tourism regained a prominent role, and residents began to feel safer and more proud of their communities. Participants noted influences that they perceived as causes of the change in sense of place during the 20th century.

3.1 The Dynamism of Sense of Place

Sense of place emerged as a dynamic concept in all three communities. For example, Cold Spring participants recalled vacant buildings along Main Street during the 1980s. Those memories, combined with their expressions of pride in the uniqueness of their village, illustrate the recent strengthening of sense of place.

Adam: Right, it is a unique thing. It is a unique thing. And in '82 it was all boarded up. I remember.

Karen: And with shopping changing over the last 20 years, Cold Spring went through a big period with a lot of truly empty storefronts, without hope.

Similar place meanings were expressed in each community, but specific sites experienced shifts in meaning. One Beacon resident described Fishkill Creek's current role as a recreation site in the community and noted its industrial history.

Meghan: Yeah, absolutely as a recreation area, or you know. And it also is a historic place for many people because there used to be factories along the creek. So people have a recollection of that. Their relatives worked there.

The identity residents associated with their community was subject to changes over time as well. At different

points in a focus group session, Neil's words illustrate the change in Beacon's identity, from a factory town, to its recent rebirth as a center for the arts and home to Dia, a museum of contemporary art.

Neil: I mean it was a very industrial type of a town. So it was factories, so it had a lot of life to it because the businesses supported the ah, factories that support, you know, the community; then the cycle went round and round. So the money was being spent here; you had disposable income. As the factories started to leave and as the economic environment changed, so did Beacon. Beacon actually went into a very steep decline.

Neil: Artists were starting to come in to Beacon; it was Dia that really put Beacon on the map again. So now you, we have a lot more galleries; we have a lot more artists.

Participants were asked to describe changes their community had experienced in the last 10 years. Instead, they chose to chronicle changes over a much longer time period, often beginning with the perceived economic and social height of the Hudson Valley region at the end of the nineteenth century.

Ingrid: ...I mean in terms of that, I, I don't know if Kingston Point Beach and Park. It used to be, you know, it used to be a very, very popular destination. It was a place that the day liner would stop in the late 1800s. I mean there was an amusement park there and it was, you know... at the time it was essentially a separate city from Kingston, but it was certainly a big draw. I mean it really, really was important and then um, up through probably the early 1900s when they had the 1909 celebration, it was still pretty hot then.

Their descriptions of changes during the 20th century depict parallel declines in the economic and social viability of each community, followed by recent changes perceived to be primarily positive.

3.2 Influences on Sense of Place

The participants identified influences on the changing strength and meaning of sense of place. The influences were primarily external to the communities. External influences included industry shifts, transportation changes, relative real estate prices, the development of nearby big box stores, and Internet shopping. Internal influences, such as community planning and activism, received less attention, but still were noted as influences on sense of place.

The development of box stores and popularity of Internet shopping were depicted negatively. The other external influences had both positive and negative impacts on sense of place in the HRV communities. The departure of manufacturing firms and, more recently, IBM, was perceived as harmful to sense of place. People could no longer live, work, and play in the same community. In Beacon, the influx of artists has created new place meanings and strengthened sense of place. Highways made the communities more accessible by automobile, but the discontinuance of ferry service along the River has limited water transportation. Low real estate prices, as compared to other areas, attracted small businesses and new residents. Rising prices, especially in Cold Spring, have made it difficult for local businesses to survive.

Community planning and local zoning regulations were critical in enhancing sense of place in Beacon; they were noted as potential strategies for Kingston and Cold Spring. Community activism, through formal volunteerism on municipal boards or in non-profit organizations, and through less formal participation at meetings and events, was credited in all three communities as contributing to sense of place.

4.0 DISCUSSION

Participants' comments indicated that strength of sense of place varied dramatically in these communities during the 20th century. Sense of place was not a static concept; it changed over time in response to influences inside and outside the communities. Specifically, strength of sense of place and the context or content that people perceived as the source of community sense of place changed over time. Davenport and Anderson (2005) found that

people residing near the Niobrara River (a national scenic river in Nebraska) articulated changing place meanings; meaning changes resulted from individuals' life experiences and outside influences. Bonds with place have been linked to participation in revitalization efforts (Manzo and Perkins 2006). The stronger residents' sense of place, the more stable their community is likely to be. If, on average, residents have few or no place meanings associated with their community, it is less stable. Planned developments, as well as other events and situations, such as elevated crime rates and natural disasters, have disrupted people's bonds with places (Manzo and Perkins 2006). In the HRV communities, residents linked disruptions in sense of place to a long decline in the early and middle 20th century that has gradually been reversed in recent decades. They linked the reversal to community activism.

Sense of place is a qualitative concept, but it can be measured with quantitative scales. When compared in longitudinal studies, quantitative measurements show changes in the strength of sense of place over time. Therefore, it would seem appropriate to apply the LAC process to sense of place. Application of LAC would require the establishment of local indicator(s) of sense of place (step 3). Indicators of sense of place would be used to notify a community if its sense of place dropped below a certain threshold, allowing the community to take action to strengthen sense of place. The utility of an upper limit is less clear. An upper limit suggests that too much sense of place is harmful to a community. Tuan (1980) suggested that as strength of sense of place increased, the bond changed and the individual became rooted in the place. The implications of this phenomenon were not addressed in the project and are not discussed herein.

The meanings and values underlying sense of place also evolve over time. A place can have different meanings to different people. Value conflicts can result from disagreements over the meaning of places (Kaltenborn et al. 1999). The differing meanings can result in the selection of different community attributes to sustain. Consequently, determining limits to sense of place becomes more challenging. Numeric values can represent

the relative strength of sense of place, but might fail to capture shifts in place meanings (Davenport and Anderson 2005).

LAC assumes that definitions of the baseline condition and indicators remain constant. For example, a limit on wilderness camp areas may be associated with area (square meters) of exposed soil and vegetation loss; in this example, area as a unit measure, soil exposure, and vegetation have constant definitions and measurement methods. A wilderness management plan has specific criteria that are comparable to definitions and standards in other wilderness management plans. Results of interviews in the Hudson River Valley suggest that strength of sense of place and the definition underlying sense of place naturally change over time. Sense of place is not an indicator that fits cleanly within the framework of the LAC process because of its inherent variability.

Despite their incompatibility with the LAC process, place meanings should not be avoided during tourism planning and development processes. They provide a basis for consensus as residents share some place meanings; an understanding of place meanings is required to maintain a community's authenticity and appeal to residents and visitors (Hester 1985, Harrill 2004, Manzo and Perkins 2006).

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

Influences that alter places also alter place meanings; tourism development quantitatively and qualitatively alters places. Place meanings can be maintained, enhanced, or disrupted. Tourism planners should be cognizant of the following suggestions:

- 1) Sense of place naturally changes over time; the context that defines sense of place today may be different in the future.
- 2) Any commoditization of sense of place and natural resource attributes has an impact on local community residents (Hovinen 2002, Andereck et al. 2005).
- 3) The most marketable aspects of a community may jeopardize the attributes that create sense of place for current residents; promoting values that

are not shared by current residents may result in conflict.

- 4) Places in a community associated with highly valued place meanings may not be protected by legislation or regulation (Hester 1990).

In conclusion, developers, planners, and residents should be aware of the impact of developments on residents in their home communities. Plans that undermine sense of place are likely to generate opposition. Working with community stakeholders to identify place meanings, as Hester (1985) did in Manteo, North Carolina, provides an opportunity for consensus building. Although residents are not homogenous and their place meanings may at times be in conflict, they share bonds with the same place. Residents of the HRV perceived outside influences to have had more impact on sense of place than influences within their communities. Their comments indicated that community planning has played a limited role in influencing sense of place.

6.0 CITATIONS

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