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Discursive constructions of night sky experiences: Imagination and imaginaries in national park visitor narratives

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ABSTRACT

Communities and protected areas worldwide have initiated programs to protect and promote dark night skies. Yet, limited research has explored how and why night skies become of interest or meaningful to people. Because night skies are literally beyond human reach, we focus on how visitors to a U.S. national park *imagine* night skies and invoke *imaginaries* that make night skies meaningful. Drawing from interviews, we examine how visitors use symbolic language, narrative, and other discursive practices to develop the social, cultural, and spatial contexts of their night sky experiences. Findings inform our understanding of imagination and imaginaries in tourism and recreation research, while offering new approaches to night skies research.

Introduction

Over the past several decades, communities and resource management agencies worldwide have begun to define dark night skies as new kinds of natural and cultural resources and tourism attractions. In these efforts, their work aligns with the environmental imperatives of the International Dark-Sky Association, established in 1988 and now active around the world in working to reduce negative impacts of light pollution and "protect the night" (International Dark-Sky Association, n.d.). In the United States, the National Park Service has positioned itself as a key public source of information about stargazing opportunities, seeking to draw tourists to specific national parks for night sky viewing and educational experiences.

The National Park Service's prominent discourse of night skies as a natural and cultural resource implies that these have similarities to other managed resources and settings (Derrien, Stokowski, & Manning, 2015). Yet, compared to other places or resources it manages, night skies have unique qualities: for most observers, they are remote and unreachable, constantly in motion, and subject to factors that an agency cannot control. For visitors, then, appreciation of night skies in the absence of direct, tangible experience requires imaginative engagement. For agencies, management of unapproachable, vast settings that can only be experienced remotely requires special forms of interaction with visitors.

Such issues have received little attention in the scholarly literature. Instead, research about night skies tends to replicate traditional behavioral research focusing on visitors' activities at national parks (e.g., Manning et al., 2018), while the broader sociocultural contexts and influences of visitors' experiences of night skies remain unaddressed. Missing from this scholarly work is attention to the ways night skies and night sky experiences become meaningful to people at parks and protected areas as well as in other settings. Because dark night skies are remote, well beyond human reach, our focus in this article is on the ways that people *imagine* both night skies and the influence of night skies in their lives.

Imagination has long been a topic of interest in the humanities and social sciences, with early theorists often contrasting "what individuals imagine" with what is assumed to be real, objective, and rational (Adams, Blokker, Doyle, Krummel, & Smith, 2015). Though sometimes referred to (negatively) as fantasies produced in the minds of individuals, personal imaginings are not merely fantastical; they also include "realistic" imaginings about self, others, places, experiences, society, and the world generally. Thus, recent definitions of imagination have become more neutral: "the mental activity of [individuals] producing iconic or linguistic images" to create personal meaning (Arruda, 2015, p. 128).

Individual imagination cannot be decoupled from its broader social and cultural contexts. Beyond what an individual might imagine in her own mind are *imaginaries*—socially constructed meanings about reality that are shared across people and that make common social practices seem obvious and sensible (Heikkilä, 2007). Imaginaries are not products of individual minds, but collective assumptions by which people "imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). Imaginaries are assertions about reality that circulate widely across society, and are informed by social and cultural understandings of the world, mass media productions, personal experiences, and other forms of cultural representation and replication (Gaonkar, 2002; Salazar & Graburn, 2014; Urry, 2008; Valaskivi & Sumiala, 2014).

Though different in origin and scale, individual imagination and sociocultural imaginaries intertwine. On the individual level, imagination stimulates personal meanings about reality that are linguistically framed, and interpreted within broader social and cultural contexts. On the societal level, sociocultural imaginaries are made sensible within the practices of everyday life (Adams et al., 2015; Taylor, 2004; Zukin et al., 1998). Individual imagination informs embodied practices across sociocultural settings, contributing to the construction of imaginaries. Correspondingly, imaginaries orient, reinforce, or challenge individual ways of thinking about the world. Thus, research requires attention to the linkages between individual imagination and sociocultural imaginaries.

Imagination and imaginaries converge within the symbol systems of language and discursive processes. People use language to make sense of their experiences, interpret the world around them, and share their impressions and meanings about reality. This is because, "meaning is…*produced* by (language)…we can only have…meanings and experiences in the first place because we have a language to have them in" (Eagleton, 1996, p. 52). The symbols, images, and ideas that structure individual imagination interact with discourses that generate and sustain imaginaries. As Gaonkar (2002, p. 7) explains, "each society derives its unity and identity by representing itself in symbols, myths, legends, and other collectively shared significations. Language is the medium par excellence in which these social imaginary significations become manifest and do their constitutive work."

In this article, we apply the concepts of individual imagination and sociocultural imaginaries to analyze the night sky experiences of visitors to a national park. The parallel study of imagination and imaginaries to date is relatively limited in outdoor recreation, parks, and night skies contexts (but see Hayes & Lovelock, 2017; Urbanik & Morgan, 2013), though it is now emerging in natural resources research (e.g., Cidell, 2017; Hirsch, 2020; Panikkar & Tollefson, 2018). We explore several issues: How do visitors *imagine and describe* their night skies experiences, and how do they explain what they find meaningful about night skies? How do individual imaginings about night skies *invoke* sociocultural imaginaries?

We address these issues in a study of visitors to Acadia National Park, in Maine, USA, a park with a well-established night sky initiative including an annual festival, lighting reduction measures, and community partnerships. We interpret the discursive patterns expressed in visitors' narrations of their experiences of night skies, and consider how these relate to broader social, cultural, and spatial imaginaries. Since night skies, in the most general sense, are not new to most people, we consider how night sky imaginaries become shaped within familiar, everyday places as well as in the protected settings of national parks.

Connecting imagination and imaginaries

Studies about imagination have a lengthy history in the humanities (in philosophy, art, and aesthetics; see Kind, 2016) and the social sciences (notably in cognitive psychology; Brann, 1991). In contemporary times, imagination has become a central concern in society, especially relative to how "ordinary people" live their lives (Appadurai, 1996). Imagination is theorized to provide the cognitive, affective, and symbolic components of personal imaginings that, when shared, intersect with broader societal discourses (imaginaries) about the meanings and experiences of reality (Adams et al., 2015; Herbrik & Schlechtriemen, 2019).

Theories of imaginaries focus on understanding the processes by which people develop perspectives about the reality of the world, organizing these conceptually to attribute shared meaning to life experiences while creating the potential for personal and collective action (Adams et al., 2015; Arruda, 2015). Imaginaries can be described as taken-for-granted schemas for interpreting what people assume to be true in the world. Though research about imaginaries segments into various specialized interests (social, cultural, political, spatial, environmental, educational, tourism, among others), we are primarily concerned here with discursive aspects of personal imagination that align with social, cultural, and spatial imaginaries.

To examine the intersections between imagination and imaginaries, we draw from the work of two philosophers, Castoriadis and Ricoeur. Adopting a systems view, Castoriadis (1987) views society as an "imaginary institution" constructed upon interconnected networks of symbolism, significations, and cultural meanings (Arruda, 2015). Ricoeur focuses on the details of language use; his approach to imaginaries is "anchored in his theory of linguistic meaning, and occurs at the intersection of its symbolic, metaphoric and narrative versions" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 23). Both theorists assert that imaginaries are not neutral; questions of power and control are embedded within their construction and application (Gaonkar, 2002).

Imaginaries may be transmitted across society through non-linguistic symbol systems (e.g., rituals, architecture, photography), but it is through symbolic language that meanings about personal and social life, culture, space, and reality are revealed. Imaginaries can be identified through the discursive practices that constitute them; both interpersonal interactions (in the everyday,

unremarkable encounters that people share) and the mass media are influential sources. The symbolism and expression of imaginaries can be examined through the cultural analysis of texts (Lehtonen, 2000), focusing on how imaginaries "become visible in the form of images and discourses" (Salazar & Graburn, 2014, p. 2).

Imagination and imaginaries in tourism research

Imagination is central to tourism experiences because "tourism involves the human capacity to imagine or to enter into the imaginings of others" (Salazar & Graburn, 2014, p. 1). Visible in supply-side aspects of destination creation, imagination is applied in tourism branding and marketing, destination image, place-making, media production, and consumption (Forsey & Low, 2014; Richards & Wilson, 2006). On the demand side, imagination is also a cognitive or affective component of visitors' tourism experiences (Su, 2010). Individual practices of tourism and travel are oriented to making sense of uncertainties in unfamiliar contexts, while destination providers and suppliers (of attractions, transportation, accommodations, marketing, and information) simultaneously create and organize the imagined spaces that tourists visit (Salazar, 2012).

Imagination helps visitors understand the fluid meanings and patterns of events, places, and people, and plays a role in choices about visiting destinations. Research shows that people develop place attachments through imaginative mass media experiences, and varying levels of imagination proclivity can influence personal intentions to travel to new destinations (Forsey & Low, 2014; Hosany, Buzova, & Sanz-Blas, 2020). Imagination is also inherent in certain types of activities such as film tourism (Reijnders, 2011; Waysdorf & Reijnders, 2017), which engages imagination when people view films or television series or visit filming locations. Reijnders (2011) proposes the concept of *lieux d'imagination* ("places of imagination") to describe the centrality of settings and sensory elements for imagination, and the ever-shifting boundaries between real and imagined "sites" in film tourism experiences.

Personal imagination intersects with sociocultural imaginaries that circulate within the meaning-making practices of visitors, tourism suppliers, and communities. Researchers have explored imaginaries to understand the social, spatial, and cultural organization of destinations (Chronis, 2012; Gutberlet, 2019; Salazar & Graburn, 2014), institutional approaches to creating and marketing place (Gravari-Barbas, Staszak, & Graburn, 2017), and the processes by which community members and groups foster place identities (Stokowski, 2016). In these cases, the "personal imaginings of tourists, 'locals,' and tourism intermediaries interact with and are influenced by institutionally grounded imaginaries implying power, hierarchy, and hegemony" (Salazar & Graburn, 2014, p. 2).

Graburn and Gravari-Barbas (2011, p. 159) encourage "the study of imaginaries as a means to analyze the spaces in which we live." Because tourism systems link origination points, the movement of people across time and space, and destinations, much of the research about tourism imaginaries has focused on their spatial qualities (Gravari-Barbas et al., 2017; O'Reilly, 2014). Spatial imaginaries address taken-for-granted social and cultural meanings that influence images of tourist destinations, home, community, landscapes, cities, and nature, and mediate personal relationships with places. Summarizing his research at a U.S. heritage site, Chronis (2012, p. 1797) proposes that tourism imaginaries be constituted as "value-laden, emotion-conferring collective narrative constructions that are associated with and enacted in a particular place through tourism."

Night skies and darkness

Dark night skies have been conceived as a "neglected" landscape quality (Wartmann, Mackaness, Bauer, Bolliger, & Kienast, 2019). For the National Park Service, dark night skies have been formally recognized as important components of the places the agency protects since it initiated its night skies program in 1999. Opportunities for viewing night skies are described as "unique experiences that can still be found in many of our national parks" (National Park Service, 2018). Agency discourses have framed night skies as a "resource" to manage (Derrien et al., 2015), more recently emphasizing that night skies are "part of a complex ecosystem that supports both natural and cultural resources" (National Park Service, 2018).

Prior research typically has focused on objective, self-reported measures of national park visitors' night sky experiences, examining the effects of visible features in the night sky on experiences, and the acceptability of different levels of light pollution (Benfield et al., 2018; Manning, Rovelstad, Moore, Hallo, & Smith, 2015). Others have measured the educational outcomes from night sky interpretive programming (Mace & McDaniel, 2013), and the economic and wilderness values associated with night skies protection at national parks (Duriscoe, 2001; Mitchell & Gallaway, 2019). Researchers have also examined the tourism dimensions of night sky-related programming and designations (Derrien et al., 2015; Collison & Poe, 2013; Loveridge, Duell, Abbari, & Moffat, 2014; Weaver, 2011). Little of this research, however, has considered how personal imagination might be involved in meanings derived from night sky experiences.

In addition to studies of visitors' night skies experiences at parks, scholars have also explored social and cultural aspects of dark and night time environments (Edensor, 2013). Johnson (2014) documented Aboriginal cultural texts about astronomy and imagined "night landscapes," while Mathisen (2017) explored Arctic imaginaries related to the staging of the northern lights for tourists. Beeco, Hallo, Baldwin, and McGuire (2011) studied the experiential qualities of night hiking programs in parks and forests in the United States. Cook and Edensor (2017) explored a cyclist's experience of darkness, remarking on the role imaginaries play in a nighttime environment when visual features are indistinct or hidden. They conclude, "the dark landscape is always also animated by imaginaries—generated by local legends and stories, media representations and memories" (Cook & Edensor, 2017, p. 16). Though this research implicitly engages the concept of imagination, there is little direct study of the relationships between imagination and imaginaries.

Methods

The study reported here is part of a larger project exploring the perspectives of local leaders, National Park Service managers, and visitors about night skies at and near Acadia National Park. Data were collected during two week-long periods in 2013. During each visit, the first author interviewed park visitors, agency managers, and community leaders in Bar Harbor, Maine, participated in night sky programs in the park (e.g., a "Star Party" on top of Cadillac Mountain), and attended community events (e.g., an astronomy program at the local library). In this article, we report only the results of visitor interviews.

A total of 76 short interviews were conducted with park visitors (three were discarded because of audio interference, so our total is 73). Contacts were opportunistic; people were contacted at five heavily trafficked areas in the park (visitor centers, scenic vistas, and other attractions). A wide range of adult visitors were asked to participate: people alone and in groups, women and men, and younger and older visitors. About half of those approached agreed to an interview; those who declined cited a lack of interest or time conflicts. While each group had a primary interviewee, in about a third of the interviews, other group members also contributed comments. The sample of principle interviewees was evenly split between men and women; nearly half (45.2%) were first time visitors, and most lived in New England and the Middle Atlantic States (72.6%).

Because participants were intercepted on-site, interviews were designed to be short; they averaged 9 min (with an upper extent of 26 min), for a total of about 11 h of recordings. Interviews were guided by a set of questions asking about personal interests, experiences and memories related to night skies; interviewees' past and current experiences of night skies; anticipated future activities; and their night skies experiences at Acadia. Participants were asked to share basic sociodemographic information via a short survey form, and all complied. Interviews were transcribed manually into about 265 pages of single-spaced text.

Data analysis

We conducted the analysis in several stages, moving back and forth between linguistic and discursive levels of analysis (Lehtonen, 2000). Using iterative processes of reading, writing, and discussion, we first identified uses of figurative language in the interview texts, recording these as expressions of individual imagination. Figurative language frequently occurred in comments about individuals' past or current experiences of night skies; these were often organized informally as personal narratives in which interviewees described events over time and offered evaluative comments (Riessman, 1993). We analyzed these narratives for their content, form, stylistic devices, and contexts (Lehtonen, 2000), identifying three general domains within which speakers expressed imaginative ideas about night skies: history and myths; family, community and everyday life; and place-based experiences. History and myths included references to ancient times as well as contemporary culture; family, community and everyday life referenced self and others involved in night sky experiences; and place-based experiences described geographic qualities of night sky experiences. Individual narratives sometimes referenced more than one domain.

Following linguistic and textual analysis, we looked across the discursive data, identifying imaginaries as broad assertions voiced by interviewees that reflected generally accepted assumptions related to night skies and night sky experiences. These assertions were characterized by ideological and stereotypical claims. Drawing from our understanding of the literature and evidence from our data, we organized the results to show intersections of personal imagination with cultural, social, and spatial imaginaries.

Throughout the analysis, both authors read the interview transcripts multiple times, compared and discussed texts, refined themes, and debated and interpreted the symbolic, linguistic, and discursive patterns that were derived. We continually worked to achieve qualitative research standards of credibility, transferability, and confirmability of results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Riessman, 1993). Relative to credibility, we were involved in several research projects at the same park over several years, and engaged in triangulation of sources and methods. To understand the social and cultural contexts of reported experiences, we developed thick descriptions of discursive processes, forms, and styles (transferability). We worked collaboratively towards confirmability, challenging our beliefs and findings throughout the project, and maintaining regular notes to support an audit trail. Our collaborative practices led to strong agreement about the findings.

Results

Our interpretive analysis is presented in four sections to show how visitors experienced night skies by: (a) using symbolism and imagery to communicate personal meanings and emotions; (b) invoking cultural symbols to ground their experiences historically; (c) envisioning social linkages across generations; and (d) investing places with meaning. In these processes, visitors discursively linked personal imagination with broader cultural, social, and spatial imaginaries to create networks of symbolism, signification, and meaning. In excerpts from our data, visitor characteristics are briefly described, and quotations are followed by the interviewee number (I-#).

Personal imagination: symbolism in night sky experiences

Individuals described their imagined worlds symbolically, using linguistic content, form, and style to communicate meaning through imaginings of night skies. These included three types of figurative language (analogies, adjectives, and place comparisons) and one organizational form (narrative). These, along with the topical contents of interviews, are discussed below to evaluate linkages between personal imagination and social, cultural, and spatial imaginaries.

Drawing on familiar symbols, interviewees used *analogies* to objectify night skies, drawing attention to the assumed similarities

between night skies and other types of well-known objects. Interviewees pointed out similarities between night skies and an umbrella, freckles on a person, the ocean, art, running water, and other symbols. For example, a 54-year-old man from Merrimac, Massachusetts, shared, "*It's like the ocean, why do you like the ocean? Because it makes you feel small that you are just a piece of a much larger system*" (I-47). A 43-year-old woman from Pipersville, Pennsylvania, described, "*You can take it for granted 'cause it's there every day, just like running water'*" (I-40). Analogies connected generalized aspects of night sky experiences to personal experiences, emphasizing the taken-for-granted nature of night skies, their commonality, their ability to expand the imagination, and their over-arching presence. The use of analogies helped make the abstract values and qualities of night skies more familiar, using conventional associations to provide context and offering short-hand ways to suggest a range of meanings that may be hard to describe precisely. In a sense, night skies become "closer"—and by implication, night sky experiences more understandable.

In counterpoint to the positive symbolism expressed in analogies, visitors also talked about not-so-dark night skies as negative symbols, signifying the undesirable effects of development, pollution, cities, and trends in civilization generally. These symbols were used to speculate about the connections between the environmental conditions that people become accustomed to, and their experiences of new or different conditions. A 20-year-old woman from Old Lyme, Connecticut, said that she'd feel like she was "*living in a cave*" if dark night skies became harder to find (I-28). A 23-year-old man from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, imagined sadness, likening the loss of night skies to extinction:

> It'd be just as sad as it would be to lose an endangered species, like lose a big cat like the cheetah or something like that…This is actually probably a lot bigger than that but it would be deeply sad; it would be deeply sad. (I-20)

In addition to their imaginative efforts to make night skies more familiar (and to make meaning of their loss), interviewees used figurative language to connote the mysterious, unknowable, and awe-inspiring qualities of night skies. These sentiments were expressed with *adjectives* that conveyed emotional responses to night skies, including: deep, mysterious, expansive, unknowable, unattainable, foreign, inspiring, and beautiful. For example, a 41-year-old woman from Montreal, Canada, shared, "*You know the skies are very foreign; it's big, it's deep, the universe is just…when I see the night sky [I feel] very small*" (I-9). A 56-year-old woman from Jackson, New Hampshire, shared, "*Last night when we looked at the sliver I said…'Can you imagine how they just walk on the moon there?' It's just incredible and wonderful at the same time. I think that curiosity [is] in all of us*" (I-30). Thus, analogies and adjectives were used to highlight the unknown, draw symbolic connections, and reveal emotion associated with night sky experiences.

Beyond analogies and adjectives, place comparisons were used specifically in referencing spatial imaginaries (and sometimes past-present comparisons within cultural and social imaginaries). Place comparisons were typically literal, rooted in first-hand observations and experiences, and documented changes interviewees had witnessed over their lifetimes. Comparisons of places provided context for personal experiences, and were often presented nostalgically.

Personal imagination cannot be reduced only to language style, however; meaning is also carried in forms of presentation, such as whether speech is formal or colloquial, or poetic or argumentative. In our data, narrative was a prominent discursive form used by interviewees to discuss their night sky experiences. Some interviewees told stories to illustrate the meanings night skies had had in their lives—meanings that could not be easily simplified in analogies or adjectives. The plots of these narratives were often not elaborate, but they illustrated how personal imagination connected with imaginaries in interviewees' own framing.

Cultural imaginaries: historical symbols and aesthetics

Interviewees used specific cultural symbols to relate their night sky experiences to the recent and distant past. Personal imaginings intersected with cultural imaginaries in their reliance on collective assumptions about time, mythology, and aesthetic experiences. Imaginaries asserted the universality and timelessness of night sky experiences, assumed shared expectations about the symbolism and aesthetic values of night skies, and affirmed the embeddedness of night sky experiences in memory, history, and culture.

In their interviews, visitors described relationships with night skies that referenced both utilitarian and cultural purposes; these were revealed in visitors' interests in learning about mythology, and in appreciating skills such as navigating by the stars. Visitors imagined night skies as offering experiences that were re-created across space and time; one 42-year-old woman from Augusta, Maine, described night skies as a "*a tieback to an earlier, simpler time*" (I-61). A 57-year-old man from Haymarket, Virginia, described his historical interest in nautical navigation, explaining that "*It goes back to the nautical times for me, I'm a history buff [and I know] that the seafarers depended so much on the stars*" (I-24). Interviewees said that hearing myths about constellations made them feel connected to ancient people, who had envisioned and created the stories that people today follow in the sky across the seasons.

Not all references were to ancient times: many were to notable moments of recent history or popular culture. Interviewees were inspired by seeing the International Space Station move across the night sky, or became interested in night skies by watching the Star Wars movies. A 58-year-old-man from Keene, New Hampshire, mentioned meeting Neil Armstrong at an observatory "*three weeks before he died*" (I-23). Interviewees named their favorite constellations and celestial phenomena (the northern lights, the Pleiades cluster, the Milky Way, the moon). In their night sky references, precision about these cultural symbols was as important as demonstrating knowledge gained through first-hand experiences. Cultural imaginaries were thus fueled by personal interest and past experience.

Curiosity about others and other places stimulated the cultural imagination. A 66-year-old woman from Hampton, New Hampshire, spoke about taking "*a tour of Alaska (and) listening to some of the Indigenous people's tales*" (I-22). Visitors speculated about what life was like for people living in places that were outside the realm of their own experiences, such as in large cities. A 62-year-old woman from Reading, Pennsylvania, described how her children asked, "'*where do they play during the day?' It's just so different. In*

New York it's like, 'wait a minute—where is the sky?'" (I-65). A 44-year-old woman from Lamoine, Maine, described a memory of a cross-cultural travel experience with her students:

> *I took students a couple of years ago [to] Tanzania…Most of the students were American [and] have never lived anywhere without… electricity and so they actually were amazed. They had never seen this; "Oh look at the sky!"…It's interesting to see how people experience it for the first time.* (I-37)

Aesthetically, interviewees also described having unexpected or extraordinary experiences of night skies: seeing a beautiful sunset, walking on a moonlit beach, and seeing stars very clearly. These were sometimes elevated by emotionally laden life moments (e.g., a marriage proposal, or a time of personal struggle or change). Visitors typically imagined these experiences as being singular and beautiful; they were described as deeply meaningful and persisted in memory long after the experience.

One of these memory-making events involved sunsets. A 57-year-old woman from Auburn, Maine, explained, "*Walking up the path [on that beach] I saw the most beautiful sunset I've ever seen. I wish I'd had a camera…But it's still in my memory because it was gorgeous*" (I-49). Another, a 63-year-old man from Danvers, Massachusetts, described how "*we went to Hawaii, Maui and the skies there were beautiful. We took pictures [of] sunsets and different colors. I think the whole family remembers our time there*" (I-25). These discursive practices of communicating pleasure and surprise were coupled with the shared experience of awaiting an extraordinary "natural" performance.

Social imaginaries: intergenerational linkages, and leisure activities

The formative nature of childhood experiences for the development of appreciation and interest in night skies is a central theme in these data. Social relationships were a focal point in narratives, and intergenerational relationships prominently featured grand-parents or parents teaching children about night sky constellations or mythology. Interviewees explained how night sky experiences connected them to family members, whom they admired for their night sky knowledge. For example, a 23-year-old man from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, explained that, "*Mom and Dad would take me out in the backyard and we'd lay on the blanket and look up at the stars…it's a kind and nurturing childhood memory*" (I-20). Another visitor, a 44-year-old man from Northborough, Massachusetts, shared,

> *My grandfather used to take us out to go out in the woods and stuff like that and so, so it's got a strong kind of soulful connection.… Whenever there were stars or anything like that he knew where everything was and he had stories for all of them and they were just stunning.…I keep wishing that I had that ability to pass on to my kids, but I don't.* (I-19)

In the interviews, visitors often imagined the future implications of these childhood experiences, and their own responsibility to future generations; nostalgia was a key feature of these imaginings. But, many felt they had forgotten the details of those stories, or had few opportunities to share them. A desire to reproduce childhood night sky experiences for their own children was a theme across the intergenerational stories told about night skies; these were also implicit within societal-level social imaginaries about the nature of family, family traditions, and the importance of childhood experiences in nature.

Interviewees also perceived that night sky quality was deteriorating in contemporary times, which meant that younger genera-tions were lacking the first-hand experiences with dark night skies they needed to encourage their own interests. For many, the imagined future for night sky experiences was not hopeful, as illustrated in the comments of a 43-year-old woman from Pipersville, Pennsylvania, who embedded memories of her own experiences with observations of her children:

> *Things that I remember, laying out when I was young camping—we used to camp a lot—you could just look up and see so many clear stars and I just don't see my kids doing that like I used to. So that's kind of sad. The fact that you have to point it out is sad to me.* (I-40)

Family ties and intergenerational relationships were one notable influence on interviewees' night skies experiences. Another was the realm of leisure (in childhood and since), which provided interviewees with socialization into a variety of recreational activities that supported their night sky interests, learning, and appreciation. Some visitors spoke about their time in the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and about the skills they gained (e.g., camping) through those involvements. Others had neighbors who shared telescopes, or they visited observatories in family or school trips, took classes in astronomy, or visited beach houses or cabins where they began to notice night skies. These life experiences become the basis for long-lasting memories that feature social experiences as a basis for personal meaning.

The night sky itself was also sometimes imagined as an active participant in interviewees' stories. A 37-year-old man from Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, mused, for example: "*[the sky] is this common thing that goes with you wherever you [go]…like, emotionally it goes with you*" (I-50). Narrators generally stopped short of personification, but they did remark on celestial events and described their emotional connections to them. These imaginings can be read not only literally, but also as stories of the self. They draw upon social imaginaries related to self-actualization and fascination with nature. Meanings of the self were implicit in many of these narratives. For example, a 23-year-old woman from Standish, Maine, recounted a time she lived away from home, and how the sky provided hopefulness ("*the sky is good*") during a difficult time.

> *I lived in Iowa this fall for a period of months and I was stuck there for Thanksgiving.…I was living in the city, [and] I just want to see open space, so I drove for many hours, to the middle of nowhere and the sun was setting and it was really nice, and I just kind of sat there and looked at the cornfields and looked at the sky and it was really good.…I hated my job there. I love Iowa, but I hated my job and I was really upset and you know not near any close friends or anything, but I was just like: the sky, the sky is good and everything's gonna be okay.* (I-

27)

This narrative symbolically deploys the open space of the Iowa countryside and the setting sun of the night sky as metaphors for resolving personal difficulties. In it, the sky was a soothing influence, something like a friend in difficult times. Linking nature and self, and past, present, and future, this story links imagination to social imaginaries in its resolution.

Spatial imaginaries: home and away

In addition to reflecting on the social circumstances and cultural influences that mediate night sky experiences, visitors also talked about important places in their pasts. Place comparisons were common in these interviews, as visitors connected personal experiences and observations to broader spatial imaginaries. Non-urban places where interviewees had grown up or previously lived were specifically recalled for their special night skies qualities. The attractive night skies of these places reinforced bonds to place and also stimulated personal interest in night skies. These memories also conjured spatial imaginaries related to rural values.

In recounting prior place relationships, interviewees claimed credibility from deeply rooted knowledge and past experiences. For example, a 62-year-old man from San Diego, California, spoke about both his wife's and his own connections to particular types of places to support his knowledge of night skies.

> *[My wife] grew up out here so she's used to having the skies dark and no interference from the city lights so you can really see the stars pop out….But I lived in a large town and so I understand how that is, if the lights get too bright in the city then you can't see the night sky.* (I-33)

These recollections draw on both spatial and cultural imaginaries of rural and urban places, the assumed relationships with nature and natural processes that people have in those places, and how those ideals and relationships become embedded in one's imagination of self. This quote also implicitly references a set of assumed differences between people who grow up in cities and rural places.

Some visitors, often those who lived in small towns and rural areas, indicated that their choices about where to live were shaped by the symbolic values of night skies. These assertions were typically framed as a reaction to the undesirable living condition of large cities. These interviewees drew on popular dualisms of the city/country and the urban/rural to invoke broader spatial imaginaries related to quality of life. For example, a 54-year-old visitor from Shelburne, Massachusetts, described himself as wanting to live away from cities, to "be away from all of that."

> *I like seeing stars. I live in the western part of Massachusetts. We have very few light pollutants, very little light pollution where I am. So most of the places I go you can see the stars. When I go down to places like [where] I work over at the University of Massachusetts and look at the night sky there you can hardly see it, because of all the lights are everywhere. Or go to the city it's the same thing. You can't see anything…I live where I live because I like to be away from all that.* (I-75)

The desire to have one's own space reflects an intersection of spatial and social imaginaries in American culture. This was implicit in the comments of a 31-year-old woman from Pensacola, Florida, who simultaneously drew on the symbols of being "away from the city" and "away from everybody":

> *One of the reasons why we chose where we live was because it was away from the city and not a lot of lights. So where you could see [the night sky]. And then, two, wherever you can see the night sky you know it's a healthier environment. Whereas if you're in town and you can't see it, you know it's not as clear.…The other side of it too is that you know you're away from everybody and it's just nice.* (I-36)

While many interviewees discussed night skies in terms of the places they lived, others described seeking out night skies when they traveled; they saw night skies as "destination" qualities to be appreciated away from home. Visitors from metropolitan areas tended to assert the importance of tourism for night skies experiences, such as a 23-year-old man from Bridgeport, Connecticut, who shared, "*I like to get away to go be able to see the sky*" (I-56). Visitors drew on comparative values to support these assertions, giving examples of the places they had visited. For example, a 56-year-old man from Detroit, Michigan, shared,

> *[The quality of night skies is] very important because you can tell the difference. When we're in the city you can only see a few stars. You come out here and you can see the Milky Way.…That's why we come to these different areas. To get more back into the nature of things and, because we appreciate that.* (I-44)

In this way, night skies were used to symbolize deeply held values related to nature and its associated characteristics. Even if not the main draw of travel itself, attractive night skies were bundled with other desirable characteristics of chosen destinations.

In imagining night skies as destination experiences, people also shared their perspectives about what they saw as environmental realities. Interviewees imagined dark night skies as a resource or amenity that was naturally present in certain (rural, natural) places, normalizing their degraded quality elsewhere (cities). In this way, visitors judged urban areas as inevitably and irreparably light polluted—and they imagined rural areas as inexhaustible in their availability and ability to provide dark skies. For example, a 23-year-old man from Roslyn Harbor, New York, shared,

> *I guess it depends where we are, because I'm from [the] New York City area so you can't really do much with light pollution there, but maybe around here or more rural parts. I don't know, I think you've got to just live and let live. Like you can find a night sky somewhere if you want to go look for it.* (I-55)

His argument—that dark night skies will always be available somewhere, and it is the task of individuals to seek them out—was also made by others who thought that night skies should be protected in parks by agencies such as the National Park Service. These

imagined futures draw on the broad assertions of place comparisons that are inherent, and always under negotiation, in spatial imaginaries.

Discussion

This article examined the role of imagination and imaginaries in night sky experiences of visitors to Acadia National Park. We focused on verbal expressions of imagination presented by individuals describing their night skies experiences, and on linkages between individual imaginings and cultural, social, and spatial imaginaries. Results show that individuals construct meanings about night skies within everyday settings where cultural symbols, the social influence of family and friends, and place-based memories shape personal imagination. Our interviewees used figurative language (analogies, adjectives, and general comparisons) and told stories to convey their imaginings about night skies. Throughout their interviews, they also made broad assertions reflecting general assumptions about people, place and history; we interpreted these claims as discursive actualizations of social, cultural, and spatial imaginaries.

These research findings introduce new insights about individual and social behavior in the context of imagination and imaginaries. In a general sense, recreation experiences are valued for personal benefits such as improving skills, fostering social connections, maintaining mental health, building self-esteem, learning about nature, and so on. But this study shows that recreation might also be considered as a site of "conversational play" where people share personal imaginings and stories, and link their ideas to collective imaginaries. These discursive values potentially offer new avenues for understanding recreation experiences.

The results of this study show that night sky experiences at parks are informed by prior experiences in close-to-home, everyday settings, and in leisure travel. To more fully understand night skies imaginaries, comparative research and multiple, diverse sources of data are warranted (Edensor, 2013), to examine tourist sites and experiences that explicitly rely on imagination, and those that re-create, create or interpret places of the past (e.g., heritage tourism, dark tourism, book tourism). In these, imagination is at the heart of the experience (Reijnders, 2011), as tourists (and tourism providers) look backward and forward in time to continually re-fashion and re-assemble their meanings of history, self and society, and place.

Theoretically, our findings revealed unexpected functions of narrative. Narrative is a common discursive device for organizing personal experience (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012) and has been widely applied in tourism and outdoor recreation research, often to understand meanings of the self. In our study, though, narrative exhibited two additional functions. First, by their very nature, stories are particularly useful in providing a structure for speaking about memories. Though memories can always be interpreted as stories of the self (Riessman, 1993), this study suggests that they are equally useful in exploring discursive qualities of personal imagination. Second, interviewees constructed symbolically rich stories linking personal imagination, emotion, and experience with narrative conclusions (reflections) that assert cultural, social, and spatial imaginaries. In these, processes of reflection were similar to the *evaluation* component of stories (Johnstone, 1990), situating meaning in contexts beyond the individual. Narrative reflection thus functions as an important conduit between imagination and imaginaries, bridging personal expressions of imagination with the collective assertions of imaginaries. Further study of narrative qualities and functions in tourism settings is warranted.

Examination of cultural, social, spatial, and other types of imaginaries in tourism research often proceeds from an institutional perspective, inferring effects for individuals. In the research described here, we worked in the opposite direction, starting with park visitors' imaginative commentaries and inferring imaginaries. These approaches are complementary, and both are needed to advance understanding of tourist behavior and destination management (Graburn & Gravari-Barbas, 2011). Though we specifically focused on discursive aspects in this article, studies of the patterns and practices of other social behaviors are also needed.

With origins in the figurative language of imagination, interviewees contextualized their night sky experiences in social, cultural, and spatial imaginaries—broad assumptions about reality stabilized through narrative discourses. In asserting collective meanings, imaginaries were materialized in ideological and at times stereotypical claims. These obtain power by simplifying reality (Heikkilä, 2007), especially when multiple meanings are held simultaneously. For example, interviewees asserted that night skies had personal meaning while also being universal (cultural imaginaries); they were significant for family members and ancestors even as they were timeless (social imaginaries); and they symbolized deep personal ties to nature even as environmental qualities were impacted by society (spatial imaginaries). Because imaginaries are fluid perspectives on reality, we would expect them to vary across social groups.

Discourses of imaginaries consolidate ideas as "belonging" to society rather than individuals (Gaonkar, 2002), and in this respect, they accommodate a range of significations and meanings. But this can also create problems. In this study, discourses of imaginaries about night skies and night sky experiences incorporated unspecified referents, diffusing responsibility for nature and resource protection across society (e.g., "*we* should preserve natural areas"; "*you* can find a night sky somewhere"). These imaginaries side-stepped important questions about access to night skies, clean environments, and tourist travel generally, while maintaining illusions of agreement with societal efforts to conserve resources and valued places.

Conclusion

Salazar and Graburn (2014, p. 2) assert that the intangible nature of tourism imaginaries means that their "operating logic" emerges from within "the multiple conduits through which they pass and become visible in the form of images and discourses." Some of these conduits are institutional (the mass media, resource management agencies, community tourism promoters) while other influences are grassroots, arising from individuals whose sociocultural understandings and imaginative practices interact with broader imaginaries. In these processes, tourism-related imagination and imaginaries are continually subject to discursive

negotiation.

Our focus on the intersections of imagination and imaginaries favors a theoretically expansive, contextualized approach to recreation and tourism behavior. Though language is the primary medium by which tourism's social, cultural, and spatial imaginaries are created, shared, and transmitted across society, it is important to recognize that imaginaries "are irreducible to meaning alone" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 19). Imaginaries are consequential: they are situated within and influence the social practices, patterns, and performances of how people live, their relationships with other people and objects, and the ways they structure and interact with the world around them. Further, tourism imaginaries are enacted within systems of power, deployed to support or challenge alternative conceptions of reality (Salazar & Graburn, 2014). In our study, the ability of individuals to obtain "first-hand knowledge" by fulfilling "personal travel choices" to "idyllic rural" places (Shucksmith, 2018) were all assumptions supporting night sky imaginaries, reflective of particular personal, social, and economic circumstances, and associated relationships of power. The intersecting effects of imaginaries deserve further study.

Even though the context for this project was a U.S. national park, our questions and approach are relevant for other public lands and communities that seek to protect and promote dark night skies. The International Dark-Sky Association recognizes several types of "dark sky" designations in addition to parks; these encompass wildlife refuges, campgrounds, heritage sites, towns, cities, and even subdivisions. Many resource management agencies and communities are involved in managing resources that are affected by actions beyond their boundaries (such as night skies). Exploring the common and divergent ideological and political dimensions of transboundary management approaches—and their associated imaginaries—are important topics for future research. We also encourage a multidisciplinary social science approach for future research that examines visitor experiences and management approaches in all of these types of places. Practical extensions of these insights will inform tourism and recreation planning and management to help garner local support for the protection of dark night skies and deliver more resonant night sky programming and communications.

The construction of personal imaginings, of course, occurs for individuals both on-site at recreation and tourism places and off-site, prior to and following travel experiences. Given contemporary public health and economic challenges, research about imagination and imaginaries might also address the experiences of people who are unable to travel for health, safety, or financial reasons, but who can still travel in their imagination via virtual tourism. The imaginative work of tourism providers is also apparent in contemporary times, and the implications of new mediated forms of communication for tourism imaginaries is a rich topic for future study.

Finally, beyond the appreciation of night skies, the study of social, cultural, and spatial imaginaries is important for understanding recreation and tourism experiences generally. These experiences involve all sorts of natural and cultural resources, and all kinds of places that engage the imagination of visitors. New (and repeat) visits are inevitably motivated by imaginative reconstructions of people's prior and everyday experiences. Through analysis of language and discourse, the study of imaginaries—for night skies and other contexts—offers an opportunity to bring into sharper focus what might otherwise be taken for granted.

Statement of contribution

1. What is the contribution to knowledge, theory, policy or practice offered by the paper?

This article contributes to the tourism literature on imagination and imaginaries. It examines the discursive processes through which night skies are imagined, described, and linked to broader social, cultural, and spatial imaginaries. Our analysis of imaginaries starts with personal imagination, rather than the more common starting point of community, media, or institutional discourses. We find that narrative reflection, marked by symbolic and figurative language, was an important conduit between imagination and imaginaries, bridging micro-level instances of personal imagination with macro-level expressions of imaginaries. We also contribute a contextualized understanding of night skies experiences, and suggest future research about discursive aspects of recreation and tourism practices.

2. How does the paper offer a social science perspective/approach?

Our theoretical approach draws from multidisciplinary social science (sociology, geography, and anthropology), and uses a qualitative, interpretive approach to analyze discourse at micro and macro levels. By developing and applying an analytic approach that connects the concepts of imagination and imaginaries, we advance social science approaches in tourism research that examine these concepts independently. Our integrative approach offers an important conceptual link that connects related fields of study, and a practical link for how to analyze these concepts and their intersections. We hope our work will advance a multidisciplinary social science approach that examines the discursive constructions of experience from multiple angles.

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