

Wildland Fire and Organic Discourse: Negotiating Place and Leisure Identity in a Changing Wildland Urban Interface

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A lack of research on the conceptual intersection of leisure, place and wildland fire and its role in identity prompted this exploratory study. The purpose of this research was to gather evidence regarding how people negotiate identities under the threat of wildland fire. Qualitative interviews with 16 homeowners and recreationists who value leisure activities in undeveloped places in Colorado's Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest were conducted. Results show that wildland fire plays a varied role in the identities of many of the research participants. Three dominant discourses of nature (i.e., humanist, protectionist and organic) helped explain these identity-related reactions to wildland fire. An understanding of the multidimensional aspects of place and leisure identity highlighted in this research could help land managers particularly related to the organic discourse.

Keywords discourse, humanism, identity, leisure, organicism, place, protectionism, qualitative research, wildland fire, wildland/urban interface (WUI)

Since the great fires of drought-ravaged 1910 first prompted the United States Forest Service to declare war on wildland fire and battle it “to the death” (Pyne, 2004, p. 874), massive resources have been directed toward fire suppression. Over time, fire fuels accumulated. Since the 1980s, researchers also have watched a growing trend with increasing numbers of people seeking leisure opportunities, recreating and living in what has been called the Wildland/Urban Interface (or WUI) (Hammer et al., 2007). The draw is multifaceted. These exurban regions, where developed areas meet and intermix with natural settings, are believed to offer pristine authentic rural life experiences away from the stress and dangers of the urban world.

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Research efforts have focused on the extent to which wildland fire poses a threat to outdoor leisure activities, particularly in WUI forests. Many of these studies have concentrated on the economic impact of wildland fire burning popular recreation areas (Englin, Loomis, & Gonzalez-Caban, 2001; Starbuck, Berrens, & McKee, 2006). Other attitudinal studies have investigated how social norms influence the way recreationists perceive fuels treatment (Kneeshaw et al., 2004a; Kneeshaw et al., 2004b). However, little research has examined how people perceive wildland fire, particularly regarding their experiences with highly valued places in which they recreate and engage in practices of identity.

The purpose of this article is to move beyond attitudinal and economic approaches to understanding the contemporary human relationship to wildland fire. We aimed to examine the different ways in which a sample of people engaged in leisure activities are conceptualizing and reconciling possible identity conflicts in their experience with wildland fire. Although not our intention at the outset, the analysis of interviews problematized a long history of focusing on a particular opposition in the human relationship to nature. We intend to demonstrate that some people draw on broader discursive resources in what Giddens (1991) has called the “reflexive activities” of “self-identity” (p. 14). Rather than thinking in terms of discourses of preservation versus discourses of use in people’s negotiations with concepts of wildland fire, we provide evidence of a third discourse that stands in a unique place outside of these commonly considered discourses. Ultimately, knowledge of this discourse may help land managers better understand identity as process. We examine what that process looks like especially as it pertains to leisure activities and wildland fire.

First, we consider the intersection of theoretical concepts of place and leisure and the role that junction might play in identity. We also will reflect upon the function of discourse as described in discursive social psychology. Adherents to this research approach attempt to account for the subtle interplay of place and leisure. Scholars have struggled with the idea of identity since the earliest days of sociology (Durkheim, 1954) and psychology (Freud, 1999), and later in linguistics (de Saussure, 1974), anthropology (Douglas, 1966), social psychology (Tajfel, 1974) and critical/cultural studies (Woodward, 1997). Woodward offered this general statement about the role of identity in human experience:

... identity gives us a location in the world and presents the link between us and the society in which we live; this has made the concept the subject of increased academic interest as a conceptual tool with which to understand and make sense of social, cultural, economic and political changes. (p. 1)

Environmental changes also could be added to this list.

As Giddens (1991) argued, identity is not so much a static unitary thing as a multidimensional junction of potentially fluid narratives or discourses. Webler, Tuler and Kreuger (2001) defined discourses as “shared, structured ways of speaking, thinking, interpreting and representing things in the world ... [also] called frames, speech genres, interpretive repertoires, or simply, perspectives” (p. 435). According to Giddens, in the past one’s identity (life) discourses were relatively stable and determined by structures of tradition, religion and social hierarchy. Modernity provided individuals with more opportunities to assemble an identity (or identities) from a much larger set of discourses, which grows every year with the seemingly limitless possibilities of globalization. Drawing from Giddens’ work, Williams and Van Patten (2006) warned, however, that this panoply of discourses brings with it a cost—a tension—between the freedom and burden of choice.

Researchers focused on identity have been occupied with describing resonant discourses that support particular ways of being including gender (Ehrenreich, 1995), race (Stam, 2001), class (Thompson, 1964), sexuality (Kipnis, 1992), age (Bhabha, 1992), the

developing versus developed world (Said, 1993) and media (Hoover et al., 2004). Identity supportive discourses of place use a concept called place identity (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983; Williams, 2002). Attempts have been made to account for salient identities of place in general (Proshansky, 1978) and more recently identities associated with natural places (Brooks, Wallace, & Williams, 2006; Farnum, Hall, & Kruger, 2005). Massey (1994) and Gustafson (2006) pointed out that, just like general identities, place identities should not be considered static and inert but rather fluid and processual with different individuals and groups possibly ascribing different meanings to the same geographic locations.

People's identity experiences with places involve more than the knowledge that those geographic spaces and their associated meanings exist. The collection of concepts and impressions gathered under the term leisure also has been recognized as contributing a distinct discourse of identity. Some early leisure studies sought to identify and describe the way leisure served the project of self-identity. In 1991, Haggard and Williams wrote that "despite a rapidly growing literature in psychology, we know little about how important leisure is to self-affirmation" (p. 105). To remedy this concern, they called for "specifying and measuring the self-identity benefits of leisure activities" (p. 116) to determine how "leisure activities symbolize identity images" (p. 117). Their research and other studies that followed supported the idea that people actively select leisure experiences in support of preferred identities. Much like identity discourses related to race, gender and class, leisure activities reflexively present stories to individuals and to broader society about who they are, or at least wish to appear to be (Patterson et al., 1998). Williams (2002) wrote:

... people value their relationships to leisure places just as they might value enduring involvements with certain people or particular 'free time' activities. We choose leisure places not merely because they are useful for leisure, but to convey the very sense of who we are. (p. 353)

Fine (1998) specifically investigated the way leisure activities in nature-based places have become a site of identity negotiation. In his participant observation research, Fine wanted to understand more about how mushroom gatherers could both take from and value nature in their collecting expeditions. Fine argued that mushroomers negotiate their relationship to nature through the process of naturework, that is, the act of giving meaning to nature from the ideological toolkit (i.e., discourses) to which they have been exposed since birth. He stated, "my argument is not that every individual has a single, consistent ideology but that we draw from extant cultural images" (p. 2) gathered both in our personal experiences with the natural world and from social identities, often provided by "moral entrepreneurs" (p. 259). These entrepreneurs are charismatic individuals who, in their stories, share meaningful elements supporting broader discourses of nature. It is possible, Fine believed, for people to simultaneously hold competing identities "vehemently 'environmental'" and "profoundly supportive of development and human usage" (p. 260).

Fine (1998) questioned the assumption that naturework takes place in terms of either utilitarian (i.e., humans as nature's stewards) or preservationist (i.e., nature stands outside of human control) discourses. Although this dichotomous assumption dominated our thinking in the early stages of analysis, later as the evidence accumulated we were convinced by Fine's "metaphorical visions of nature" (p. 6). Under Fine's humanist discourse (e.g., utilitarianism, conservationism, wise use), nature is characterized as something to be protected and made available for human use from one generation to the next. Over time, a variety of distinct humanist ideas have emerged from nature as foe to be vanquished to nature as friend to be conserved. Ultimately according to humanism, nature is a tool for human use and subject to human control. The protectionist discourse (e.g., preservationism) promotes

a story in which nature least touched by humans is most authentic. Human experience with the most pristine nature is believed to be the most rejuvenating, which Fine found somewhat ironic. Elements of the natural world are believed to have rights, just as a human would, that are to be protected (i.e., with humans playing the role of protectors). In his departure from the usual dualism, Fine posited a third discourse that he termed organic. In describing this worldview, Fine was guided by the examples of deep ecology, ecofeminism and Gaian philosophy, although these ontological perspectives are more radical than his more pragmatic organic concept. According to Fine's organic perspective, it is important not to separate culture and nature as opposing others—squared off in definitive camps. Instead, humans are considered to be as much a part of existence as any other element of nature, with no more or no less importance than anything else.

Accounting for such potentially complex ideas as identity, place, leisure and the sort of discourses presented by Fine (1998) requires a research orientation that accounts for both agency and the limits of social structure. Discursive social psychology (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004; Van Patten & Williams, 2008) provided the theoretical perspective we needed. Korobov and Bamberg (2004) argued that people do not absorb identity supportive meaning from discourses in a ready-made fashion. Instead, in an agentic sense they accomplish meaning, as Van Patten and Williams (2008) wrote:

... strategically pick[ing] a discursive position among those available, which when practiced over time become part of a repertoire to be employed in varying contexts. In other words, Korobov and Bamberg [argue] ... that repertoires are not so much *performed* (e.g., as with attitudes and other cognitive entities) but *performed* (e.g., as in role taking and acting). (p. 452)

Based upon this idea, our goal as researchers was to prompt stories from our study participants that would elicit identity supportive discourses meaningful to understanding the intersection of place, leisure and wildland fire (Wuthnow, 1987).

If place and leisure have both become important contemporary locations for discourses from which people construct, narrate and maintain their identities (Williams, 2002), then what happens when those places and leisure experiences are threatened or changed by wildland fire? We wanted to know if study participants saw wildland fire as a challenge and what accounted for possible differences in reactions to wildland fire. We examined the range of this difference and the discourses that support these processes of identity.

Study Area

This study took place in the wildland urban-interface (WUI) region of Colorado's Front Range. This subalpine zone is bordered by the Great Plains to the east and the Rocky Mountains to the west and stretches from the Wyoming border to the north down to Pueblo in the south. The state's largest cities lie in this region as well as 85% of Colorado's population. With its relatively close proximity to heavily populated urban areas, land managers believe the Front Range presents a particularly potent mix of forests, homes, communities, recreational opportunities and wildland fire. The 1.3 million acre Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest lies in this area with more than 30,000 homes within its boundaries. The potential wildfire situation has been exacerbated by decades of persistent fire suppression efforts which have left much of the Arapaho-Roosevelt heavily laden with fuels. Drought in recent years also has increased the flammability of those fuels. At current rates of fuel removal, it would take centuries to return this forested area to anything like its presuppression state. In addition, the Arapaho-Roosevelt region has become particularly

popular with people seeking leisure experiences in and around pristine landscapes. This popularity has resulted in steady yearly increases of residents and those involved in recreation.

Methodology

The interpretations presented here are the result of semi-structured interviews that began in September 2002 and concluded in January 2003. We interviewed 16 homeowners and/or recreationists who reported valuing leisure experiences in un- and little-developed places in Colorado's Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest. Our interviews and interpretations were not meant to be representative of all people who draw identity rich meanings in the Arapaho-Roosevelt. Similar to Van Patten and Williams (2008), it "was not an effort to identify universal categories of meanings, but rather exemplars of the ways people interpret, explain, and account for their actions and evaluations" (p. 453). Our research illustrated a process that has not been addressed in the past.

The study began with a convenience sample (Miles & Huberman, 1994) based on input from key informants from the Forest Service who provided the names and phone numbers of potential interview participants from agency contact lists. We arranged meetings to set up face-to-face interviews. In these initial phone conversations we said we were interested in learning about the interview candidates' views on the Arapaho-Roosevelt Forest region and whether they would be interested in participating in the research. Later, Lindlof's (1995) notion of maximum variation sampling was used to fill in demographic holes. We made efforts to incorporate a range of demographic perspectives including geography, dwelling within the study area, recreational activity, gender, age, income and race.

Ten men and six women were interviewed ($n = 16$) for a total of 14 separate interviews. Two married couples requested that they be interviewed together. Because we were interested in illustrating identity (i.e., we were essentially searching for a variety of discourses related to identity negotiation), we did not feel interviewing married people together would negatively affect our interpretations. The interviews averaged 1.2 hours each. For 12 of the interviews the principle investigator was accompanied by a graduate student interested in the topic and wishing to learn more about qualitative interviewing. The graduate student participated in the interviews, asked questions along with the principal investigator, and reflected on these conversations in postinterview discussions. Ages of those interviewed ranged from 29 to 78 years.

The in-depth open-ended interviews were guided by a flexible question guide (Miles & Huberman, 1994) intended to prompt participants to present stories related to place, leisure, wildland fire and expressed identities (Brooks et al., 2006). We began with general demographic questions asking participants to share stories about themselves (e.g., their age, a little about their past, including where they grew up, where they lived at the time of the interview, where they worked, their family arrangements and favorite activities). If they did not share stories of place and leisure particularly in the Arapaho-Roosevelt Forest Region, they were prompted to share such stories. If none of this generated narratives related to wildland fire, they were asked about their knowledge of this phenomenon such as any direct experiences with wildland fire, indirect experiences (e.g., including media coverage) and opinions about wildland fire management. In every case, participants were encouraged to develop other sometimes seemingly unrelated themes. Because our intention was gathering a variety of stories related to our topic, this strategy was meant to allow new insights and interpretations to emerge from the research.

Analysis

Analysis took place in five stages including:

1. postinterview discussion between interviewers while in the field,
2. the notation of emergent themes during verbatim transcription (Brooks et al., 2006; Hoover et al., 2004; Patterson & Williams, 2002),
3. the repeated reading of transcripts by research team members who discussed them and searched for themes (Hoover et al., 2004),
4. the use of document coding software (ATLAS.ti, version 5.0) to engage in ideographic (Patterson & Williams, 2002) comprehensive coding strategies, and
5. nomothetic (Patterson & Williams, 2002) qualitative analysis of theme rich cases to understand the patterns seen in the previous stage.

Four distinct themes emerged from the first four stages of analysis. First, every interviewee was willing and able to share identity related stories of specific places of particular significance to them. A second theme involved identity-related stories of leisure experiences common in forested settings. Third, participants expressed experiences of these special places and leisure activities that we interpreted to be either beneficial or detrimental to identity-related naturework. They told us about experiences that seemed to support their expressed identities, but they also shared experiences that seemed to challenge their identities. Fourth, wildland fire as a phenomenon was often presented as both detrimental and beneficial to leisure and place-based identity experience. What follows is a discussion of the final phase of analysis, the nomothetic case studies (Patterson & Williams, 2002) intended to help understand how and why study participants seemed to differ in their response to wildland fire in terms of their place and leisure-related identities.

Nomothetic Analysis

In the earliest stages of analysis, we categorized research participants as either utilitarian or preservationist in their naturework stories. In keeping with a focus of the study, we wondered whether those for whom wildland fire appeared to be a threat to their place and leisure-based identities believed humans are nature's stewards (i.e., utilitarian). On the other hand, did participants who believed nature stands outside of human control (i.e., preservationist) more accepting of wildland fire? As the study continued, we became increasingly aware of a third perspective, Fine's (1998) organic discourse.

Fine (1998) has been careful to point out that individuals should not be identified as being exclusively aligned with any one nature discourse. They overlap, to varying degrees, within the nature stories of almost everyone sometimes in seemingly contradictory ways. For instance, a 48-year-old study participant who reported strongly identifying with a particular lake area in the Arapaho-Roosevelt Forest sounded a protectionist chord when we inquired about the role of wildland fire as a part of nature:

Suzie (all names pseudonyms): Probably through history [wildland fire's] role has to happen to clear out some of the dead for fresh, for new. The sad thing is that so many people are living up here now, and so their homes are threatened, but that's kind of a chance they took when they moved up here.

In this quote, Suzie evoked the story that wildland fire is part of nature. It is a natural process and humans can be out of place in a fire prone environment. This idea follows Fine's notion of a protectionist narrative—the *separation* of humans from an authentic

nature. In an immediate follow-up question, we asked Suzie how she would feel if the lake area burned, as this was a region she identified as her strongest source of leisure and place-based identity. Her face fell as she realized what we were asking:

Suzie: (*answering quickly*) I'd be sick. I'd be *sick* if this place burned, because it's so beautiful, and to think that this has to start all over again. There was one little area, one little mountain, as we were coming up here, that the whole hill was burnt off, and I was . . . I was just really, it broke my heart. But I know that has to happen. I know it happens, but I don't have to like it (laughs). If it happened here I would be very, very sad.

Fine's humanist discourse presents itself in this statement. Suzie's identity needs came first, before the broad ecological needs of nature. She implied that even a natural process like wildland fire should be managed to protect her special leisure place. Suzie seemed to be unaware of the contradiction of these responses, which took place one after the other. Suzie also evoked what Fine labeled an organic narrative, although this one was perhaps less clear. We asked her what she thought about the growing numbers of people moving into the wildland/urban interface:

Suzie: I think the homeowners have got to take some sort of responsibility in making sure that they're doing everything they can to protect their homes, and I mean if they have to clear some trees away, then do it. By name, if you're choosing to live here, you are taking a chance.

Suzie is not saying that no one should live in the interface region (i.e., protectionist view) or that humans should be guaranteed safety (i.e., humanist view). Instead, she offered an organic perspective—people are welcome to live in the interface if they are willing to live responsibly, mitigate as needed and recognize the inherent dangers. The notion represented something of a middle ground between the protectionist and humanist narrative.

These three discourses were presented in the naturework of a single individual within the span of four minutes. Such mixing of discourses was not uncommon, but in every case one narrative seemed dominant. In our analysis, respondents were categorized according to what we considered their primary naturework discourses—humanist, protectionist and organic. What follows is a series of case reports (Stake, 2000) of interviews with study participants whom we believe exemplified Fine's three naturework discourses. We provide examples of a predominantly humanist discourse and a strong protectionist discourse, but we focus mostly on the organic with three case reports.

“I Would Be Very Sad”: A Humanist Discourse

Barb, 42, had moved to the wildland/urban interface bordering the Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest five years before. A stay-at-home mom with three children, Barb's husband worked in a nearby city. Barb struck us as an interface resident caught in a naturework vice, a protectionist concern for the environment coupled often in a contradictory way with a humanist love of the experiences afforded by her rural lifestyle. The humanist narrative, especially in relation to wildland fire management, emerged to us as dominant in her interview.

Barb expressed a leisure and place-based identity in her appreciation for the mountainous wooded setting in which she lived. She said she enjoyed most of her neighbors, especially the feeling of community they provided, as well as nearby friends for her children.

Her greatest pleasure stemmed from the landscape, the panoramic views, regular contact with wildlife and the chance to be physically active. Barb reportedly bolstered her identity as an active mountain dweller by regularly hiking and biking, often with her dog, on and around a nearby mountain:

Barb: I'll go out and walk myself, I just like going up (the nearby mountain). It's just—it's why I live up here. It feels good, it's good for the spirit.

Interviewer: What do you mean by that it "feels good"?

Barb: Well, you can sort of, you get up there and you're walking through there and the trees, the leaves, the mountains, the chipmunks . . . you can sort of forget about George Bush, and Saddam Hussein, and 9/11, or whatever else is going on . . . it doesn't take away but it's like that's part of the world, too, and I much prefer that world to what's going on out there. I don't have any control over it so I like to escape. You know, not to ignore it, I can't, but, it feels good, it sort of brings you back to . . . it makes you—the crazyness—you can hold it at bay I guess.

This pleasure fostered a pronounced protectiveness about the landscape and her activities. For instance, Barb expressed deep disappointment with off-highway-vehicle (OHV) users who she said were noisy, polluted the air and tore up local trails. She saved some of her most intense disfavor, however, for young people who partied in the woods and left their beer bottles and cans strewn about:

Barb: It's like, wait a minute. However we came to be here, we're not the only creatures here. And it should not all be for the supreme right of the human being. Well, the bugs, the birds, bees and the four-leggeds, don't they deserve something, too?

Barb even criticized government agencies for overmanaging the land—engineering and hardscaping that which she believed would be better left alone. "It's a forest," she explained. "It really doesn't need you to manage it. Let it be what it is. We don't necessarily need to keep building all this stuff."

She later interwove her story of protecting nature with a humanist tale of protecting herself. The OHV noise, exhaust smell and trail damage was most upsetting *to her*. Despite reportedly enjoying wildlife, she was less sanguine about bears and lions she feared might attack *her*. Beer refuse left by teen partiers was one thing, but the smoldering embers of their abandoned fires were quite another. Barb directed much of her humanist criticism at any situation that might spark a wildland fire and threaten her home, surroundings and recreational activities. She voiced concern about people who carelessly tossed cigarettes out car windows while driving along the mountain roads, and neighbors who refused to practice fire mitigation techniques on their properties. She believed these behaviors endangered *hers*. We asked Barb how she would feel if her leisure space (i.e., her home and its setting) burned:

Barb: I would be very sad. Of course. Again, that . . . in the big picture, you know that (wildland fire's) good, but I'm still ultimately a human, and a lot of what we want isn't necessarily good for what's around us.

Such responses were much like those of other interviewees who seemed predominantly humanist in their naturework statements. "Fires are good. But selfishly, they're not good if you live up here," Barb admitted.

“Allowing Fires to Burn”: The Protectionist Discourse

Vera, was in her early 40s, divorced, and had no children. She had spent many years as a natural resource manager and for several years had pursued formal education in an Eastern philosophy. Vera was enjoying a side career as a local leader in an alternative religious community. Many years of living in natural areas coupled with her nature-based spirituality had given Vera the ability to express her place and leisure-based identity in eloquent terms. She was asked to describe her deep connection to mountainous settings and the places she found most meaningful:

Vera: It's sort of one of those things . . . it's hard to speak about . . . “what is spirit?” But definitely, the physical . . . the physicality of it in the midst of that which brings me back to myself. The source. Whatever that source is. And that deep appreciation for the perfection in it. The soul that's in it. The feeling of cycles and the naturalness of the cycles and that sense of awe of the natural world. . . . in going out and being in the mountains for me. I mean, sure, I meditate every day and whatnot but the way that—BOOM!—right there, ground, you know, bigger picture, the relative versus the ultimate reality. Ultimate reality becomes very big, very present for me when I go into the mountains.

One can sense a humanist impulse in Vera's words. The mountains “brings me back to myself.” Her “feeling” is bound up in the “naturalness of the cycles.” “Ultimate reality” becomes “very present” for *her* in the mountains.

Vera also presented an organic discourse:

Vera: . . . what is natural? That's the question that comes in. When we say we want to return to its natural state, what is natural? Prehuman? 25 years ago? Before houses? You know, whatever, and as a manager, that's a very, very difficult task to come by. Definitely. I just see that we're just part and parcel of this whole scheme and we can't eliminate ourselves.

Humans, she explained, should not be excluded from such contact with nature. The experience has always been a part of human history and it should continue because humans are nature, and nature is humans.

Vera, however, was most likely to promote a protectionist perspective on issues related to the natural world. For instance, she discussed the need to expand wilderness areas by setting aside more interconnected zones away from human contact:

Vera: . . . we're running out. We're running out of resources, we're running out of space, so there's this encroachment that's happening. . . . I need to know that there are places that I will never even go, but I need to know that they're there, that they're protected, that the wildlife is protected, the corridors for those wildlife are protected.

As a specific example, Vera noted the need to minimize human contact with bears in the wild. “. . . there needs to be more aggressive bear management in the sense of managing humans in relationship to bears before there's a problem.”

Vera offered both protectionist and organic points of view in some of her statements about wildland fire:

Vera: I think we should be allowing fires to burn, especially in wilderness areas, we should be letting it go back to its natural cycle as best as we can. The problem is it's encircled by nonwilderness areas, by houses and whatnot. How do we . . . how do we do that? I say there has to be more allowance for fires to burn, and if not, we need to be doing prescribed burning.

Clearly, the first part of this transcript excerpt fits the protectionist philosophy. What is natural (i.e., the free burning of wildland fire) should take precedence over any other management strategy. If free burning is not feasible due to danger for human life or political opposition, then land managers should step in to manage with a more organic human-involved plan for prescribed burning. An important element of this excerpt is the transitional phrase, ". . . and if not. . ." Clearly, for Vera, the protectionist approach should come first because she feared, "we may be changing the natural, inherent nature of a forest because we stop fire." If that approach is not possible, she believed, then organic-style management should take place, as the situation warrants.

Ken, Scott, and Stacy: The Organic Discourse

We identified three people (Ken, Scott, and Stacy) who presented organic discourses particularly in terms of their opinions about wildland fire. We provide a brief sketch of each respondent followed by a discussion that draws out what we interpret to be their common use of an organic discourse to express their feelings about wildland fire in relation to their place and leisure-based identities.

Ken: "Knowing That It's Still There"

For several decades, Ken, in his late 50s, had co-owned a home and business in the Arapaho-Roosevelt. Ken shared a number of identity supportive stories about hiking, climbing and his favorite, back-country skiing. He enjoyed the companionship of doing these things with friends, but his best leisure experiences happened when he was alone with his dog:

I put the skins on my skis and the two of us walk up to the top of (the nearby ridge), it takes about an hour-and-a-half to two hours to get up to a good place, take the skins off, point the skis a 90 degree turn to the left, towards the east, drop over the lip, *rock-'n'-roll*, you know? You know, come down, put the skins back on, walk back up, pick another line, fire off as many lines as your legs have climbing in, you know, and ski down . . . ski out to the car and come out. And what is that?

For Ken, "that" was the sight of fresh tracks in the snow—his dog's, his own and nobody else's. It meant "solitude," and a "sense of adventure." He grew emphatic, ". . . it's *Zen!* *Zen!* You know, it's just total, relaxed, [slaps hands] focused concentration on something that takes everything, you know, cleans all the shit out of your head."

Ken also reported engaging in more contemplative leisure activities in the Arapaho-Roosevelt such as photography and painting (i.e., his hobbies) and just *being* in nature. Ken said he attempted to capture and hold on to those leisure activities with his photos, paintings, and a journal:

Ken: I find that most people who come up here come for a similar reason. You know, the natural beauty, the experience of just being able to get out of the car and even walk the beaten path. But even if you don't get off the beaten path, you can

look off the beaten path into the woods going up there, you can see what's there, you know, the wild flowers, birds, if you're quiet, various animals, the bigger animals are rare but, I still think there's a common thread there, there is a common reason, and it's that stress release thing, getting away from the city and the hustle and bustle and I don't know that it's so much a return to nature, as an appreciation. I think there's a certain gratification in knowing that it's still there, that there's still some place in the country or on the planet that's not spoiled.

The tales of his relationships (i.e., his friendship with his climbing partner, his skiing buddies, regulars and strangers who swap stories with him at his business and the time he spends with his dog) were integrated with stories of his nature experiences. What Ken said has solidified his identity and his connection to the area in which he lives, works, and plays, is the home he built and has co-owned with family members and a mutual friend. "We're ancient hippies," he explained. Ken and the other owners knew they could never afford it all individually, so they did it communally. "I came out here in 1965 and never looked back," he said. "I never thought of living anyplace else." When Ken presented his identity to the interviewer, he told a story of life in the mountains of the Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest, about his home, business and regular experiences in his rugged surroundings over many years both alone and in concert with others.

Scott: "I Knew There was Something Greater than Me"

Scott told of different experiences in the Arapaho-Roosevelt, but they all seemed to be just as meaningful to him. Scott, in his early 50s, lived on a river in a canyon cutting through the Rocky Mountains. Besides his teaching job in the nearby town, which he said brought him some satisfaction and paid the bills, Scott's main focus in life was wildlife husbandry including hunting, fishing, bird watching, habitat creation and banding. He reported having banded more than 10,000 birds.

These experiences brought Scott to particular places in the Arapaho-Roosevelt that became important to him for their association with his beloved leisure activities, including his house on the river and the site of numerous wildlife visits. For example, he once raised an orphaned raccoon and returned it to the wild. Other special places included favorite hunting areas with features such as particular stumps and tree stands from which he had waited over the years for elk and deer. He said he was fond of an old outhouse and said, "... when I elk hunt, I've got to go back and say 'hi' to the outhouse. I touch it. I kiss it on the side of the old wood. It's just one of those grounding areas for me." Over the years Scott organized a project where students at his school could build a birdhouse that he would locate with hundreds of others along a trail. The area held great meaning for him as did a nearby park where he took families "screech owling" at night (i.e., Scott attracted the owls with calls, and the children and parents located them with flashlights as they flew in to investigate).

Scott's connection to these natural experiences evoked the spiritual. He remembered a profound moment he had while hiking the Rawah Wilderness area in the Roosevelt National Forest:

Scott: I looked down through that valley, I knew there was something greater than me. I don't have any desire to find out what it is, because we never will. And, it could be God, it could be, oh my goodness, there's so many religions it's incredible. And I kind of like the way the Indians did it. They kind of took what was there and they tried to feel those spirits and the kindredship with those spirits,

whether it was a bird, or some other form of animal, or water, or catastrophes—and again it was simple, it was a hard life, but it was a simple life.

Simplicity was a recurring theme in Scott's tales of leisure experiences with nature and places that seemed to provide a support for his regular organic statements. Regular experience with the direct simplicity of an authentic world of nature helped him to create and maintain an identity.

Stacy: "This Is an Entire Cycle"

Forty-year-old Stacy lived with her husband and two children in a recently remodeled home on top of a large hill surrounded by forested mountains in the Arapaho-Roosevelt. The tale in which Stacy most vividly and dramatically expressed a sense of identity did not involve place or leisure experience but seemed to be connected to them. Stacy offered a definitive tale of a catastrophic fire that burned through her community in the late 1980s. Stacy and her husband had found their home by chance a year before the fire. Having family roots in Colorado ranch country, the sparsely populated mountainous setting was exactly what she was seeking. It was a place where she could fulfill her desire to have more contact with nature. "I hiked every single day. *Absolutely* every single day," she said, describing her first months in the home. "And what I *loved* about this was I could take off in *any* direction. In any direction, and just walk for a couple of miles. And I love that."

One evening Stacy received a call about a nearby grassfire. She and her husband helped to impede its progress and thought it was moving away from their home. By the time they returned to the house it became clear that the fire had changed direction and was bearing down on their neighborhood. They only had time to grab toothbrushes and close windows:

Stacy: It was one of those moments of clarity where you realize all the stuff that you cart around and make so precious in your life in the face of something as awe-inspiring as the power of a forest fire, all that clinginess that humans have, dissipates. . . . There is a moment where you just have to go. . . you have to relinquish control to it because it's a force of nature that's much beyond our petty concerns. And that was surprisingly cleansing.

Stacy and her husband retreated to a nearby hillside and could only watch as the massive fire ran down a mountain and through their subdivision. She described it as "inspiring in the way that a huge thunderstorm would be just riveting. It was a force of nature, and of course we *long* for that in many ways in our lives. And this was just a big encounter with it." Although the fire destroyed many homes in her neighborhood, Stacy's house was somehow spared.

Stacy said the event had continued to have a profound impact on her identity. She had witnessed firsthand the transformation from forest to moonscape, and back again:

Stacy: Most people live in a very fairly static environment, but for us to see the land absolutely brought to its knees and laid utterly and completely bare, and wounded, seemingly wounded to such a degree, and yet we suddenly saw that, "Oh no, this is an entire cycle that we are . . ." if we just rid ourselves of all our normal notions of what's pretty and what's right and go ahead and watch this thing unfold, it's a pretty thrilling experience to see it come back and to see the aspens come out of the ground, and see actually how the aspens from up on that hillside

have little colonies that were never here before the fire that are now springing up on this side of the road, this side of the valley. It's really cool.

Stacy told other stories that she said support her sense of identity including tales of place and recreational activities alone and with family. She shared accounts of neighborhood community, her home, its setting and her deeper philosophical views. Her direct experience with wildland fire, however, appeared to have played a prominent role in influencing what she believed about its role in the ecosystem. Wildland fire did not pose a challenge to Stacy's sense of self. It was, arguably, a foundation of her identity.

Wildland Fire and Organic Identity

Ken, Scott and Stacy's narratives provided a strong sense of an identity related to place and leisure activities not unlike personal stories influenced by broader issues of gender, race and socioeconomics (Proshansky, 1978). In their stories we detected the subtle mixture of humanist and protectionist discourses, a common characteristic of the organic orientation (Fine, 1998). In a protectionist way, that nature exists for its own sake is clearly important. For instance, each person condemned particular human behaviors they had observed that might be harmful to flora and fauna, such as leaving litter in the woods. The three also retained the humanist desire for regular personal experience with the natural world. As noted earlier, Ken wanted to have a firsthand reminder that "it's still there," to know that some place is "not spoiled." Scott said recreating in natural places reminded him of the simplicity of existence, and that helped to maintain an identity he desired. For Stacy, nature provided the lesson of death and renewal, the endless cycles of life, which were especially made clear in her stories of the transformative experience with the wildland fire that burned through her neighborhood.

From this common recognition of what they considered benefits for them personally and for those they cared for, Ken, Scott and Stacy argued that land managers should do everything in their power to provide homeowners and recreationists with experiences in nature. A protectionist observer might feel uncomfortable with this idea. All three told stories of regularly recreating (e.g., hiking, skiing, hunting) off designated trails, which is often frowned upon by land managers. Ken admitted allowing his dog to run off leash on public land as well as hiking on fragile tundra above tree line, and he rationalized:

Ken: I don't have a problem with walking up on the tundra up there. I don't beat a path on it. OK, if everybody did beat a path I could see an objection to hordes of people beating the tundra down and even though I know that if I step on some of these plants that it might take them a while to recover, but hell, they'll be there long after I'm dust. They'll be back (laughs). They'll be back, I won't.

Ken believed that, with his lengthy experience in natural settings, he had a strong sense of the limits of that environment and, therefore, his actions were justified. Both Ken and Scott were quick to point out that the role of land managers is to keep tabs on human impacts, and when it reaches a saturation point to step in and control the situation. Until that time, they said it is better to exercise loose restraint on human interaction with nature.

These analyses provide an important insight into how wildland fire plays a role in the identities of Ken, Scott and Stacy. To varying degrees, the stories of all three had a protectionist flavor when it came to fire in the forest with the message: whenever possible, let it burn. Scott was the most liberal (or conservative, according to one's perspective) about fire in the forest. He stated, "... if all of a sudden some trees and some of this beautiful

mountain mahogany is burned off, great, it was time for it to burn. When that catches fire, it's time for that to burn. We try to overmanage that, I think." Of the three, Scott was also most comfortable with the thought of his home one day being consumed by wildland fire. "That's a risk that has just been totally accepted on my part," he explained. For Stacy, a physical phenomenon such as wildland fire provided an opportunity for "a huge cleansing . . . (of) the landscape" that can endow people with a sense of a "great benevolence in the ground." Stacy was prepared to lose her home when wildland fire struck the first time, and if it ever threatened again she felt the same way. Ken had also experienced firsthand the benefits of wildland fire including its role as a "rejuvenating process" for a mountain ecosystem. He described a former burn area he had experienced while skiing in back country near his home:

Ken: . . . and there's a burn area there from 1911. There are trees that have burned up way back then. And actually, some of them are really cool because the sun has worked the bark and wood, it's all twisted and the sun has worked it over and you get all these incredible colors inside the wood there, and so forth, and the rest of it has all grown back, the aspen trees have grown back, the firs of various kinds, the evergreens have come back in and if you did not know the remaining evidence, and the historical record, you wouldn't know that a fire had taken place there. So, knowing that it's a natural process, no, I don't have a problem with letting it go.

But Ken was clearly less enthusiastic about the prospect of losing his dwelling:

Ken: You know, you get your insurance or whatever and replace your building, but hell, I've got stuff like . . . OK, if I lost my (photographic) negatives than its game over. . . . I've got family heirlooms in my house, I'm sure that everybody does. It's devastating, so, yeah, I would say I really like the suppression idea. . .

Although differences were found in the degree to which each of these respondents would accept wildland fire burning his or her favored places and impinging on leisure activities, all three told relatively similar stories about living with nature including the possibilities of wildfire. For example, Stacy reflected on what she learned from her wildland fire experience, saying it was important that humans never lose sight of where they fit in the landscape:

Stacy: . . . that's one of the things that gets way out of kilter in an environment like this where people are looking at real estate values, square footage for the money, and how they're going to landscape, all that is very human-centric to an awful degree. And what's great about a story like the fire is that you've got some other force that is incorporated into the story that puts the human presence in perspective, both a spatial perspective and a temporal one where, you know, we're youngsters on this landscape. And as humans we think we own the place, and I think the Forest Service could do an excellent job of reorienting that to where we realize that, "No, no, no, the land *allows* us to be here." . . . it's not all about our needs, as humans, we have to fit into the needs of this greater landscape itself.

Scott reached a similar conclusion when he explained, "You know, you just coexist I guess is where I'm coming from. You just coexist. And I coexist with trees, and if they burn they burn, and if they fall over, they fall over." In this leavening of protectionist and humanist

perspectives, these three provided examples of identities informed by an organic discourse. Ultimately, this allowed them to find room in their lives and to maintain desired identities informed by place, leisure and wildland fire.

Discussion

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on the human dimensions of wildland fire. The goal was contributing to Massey's (1993) argument that place does not have an inherent meaning but is meaningful due to a "particular constellation of relations articulated together at a particular locus" (p. 66). The idea was addressed by investigating the constellation of not just place but also of leisure and wildland fire. The intersection of these concepts seemed to play a role in the expressed identities of those we interviewed. People with place and leisure experience in the Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest were asked to share stories about themselves and their leisure practices in this WUI region. We paid attention to the ways wildland fire fit into these stories of self. The interviews ultimately provided evidence that illustrated a range of discourses supporting identity.

The juxtaposition of these discourses may be troublesome for people. Some researchers believe the wildland fire situation has reached the level of intractable wicked problem (Carroll et al., 2007) with stakeholders resisting any interpretation of wildland fire that might infringe upon their identity interests. The "stories we tell ourselves about who we are," as Williams (2002, p. 363) argued, ascribe meaning to such concepts as place, leisure and wildland fire. This telling may "contest the identities of others who assign different but equally essential meanings to the same [concepts]" (p. 363). The Arapaho-Roosevelt region is ripe for such conflict since the WUI areas have seen an influx of new dwellers and those seeking leisure experiences. A steadily rising nearby urban population, increased mobility and a developing infrastructure that supports a growing human presence in this region has introduced and associated somewhat incongruent values. None of those interviewed for this study had spent her/his entire life living and recreating in the Arapaho-Roosevelt region. In their stories of identity related to recreation in this place we saw potentially contentious differences. This contention was evident in the stories of Suzie who would be *sick* if the land around her favorite recreational setting burned. For Suzie, a protectionist discourse that might clear the way for any place to burn challenged her humanist identity. The same was true for Barb, who would be very sad if the recreational area around her home burned. For Vera, however, controlling fires in particular zones violated her predominantly protectionist identity. Ken, Scott and Stacy contested the humanist and protectionist discourses with their organic perspective arguing that people need to find a way to live in concert with nature including accepting, and in Stacy's case even embracing, the threat of wildland fire.

As much as contestation and difference, these interviews indicated the overlapping nature of the three discourses (humanism, protectionism and organicism). Researchers studying discursive social psychology (e.g., Korobov & Bamberg, 2004; Van Patten & Williams, 2008) have questioned the idea that people unproblematically appropriate a distinct set of predefined meanings or discourses that essentially determine identity. Instead, these researchers argue that in an agentic sense people more strategically construct identities by appropriating and often mixing discourses. This mixing was evident in this study. Study participants did not always fall into now classic assumptions about utilitarian versus preservationist discourses but rather would mix them. For example, in Suzie's interview, she presented the three discourses within a very short period. These expressions were not unusual among all of our study respondents.

From a management perspective, this study had clear limitations. The sample was too small to support any claims of representation. This research was also focused on a relatively specific area of the western United States whose inhabitants might not reflect the values of other fire prone regions around the nation and the world (Burger, 2002). The analysis might have been aided by follow-up interviews, but in keeping with the sponsoring institution's human research committee rules there was no opportunity to recontact interview participants. In addition, explaining identity, recreation and wildland fire in terms of three distinct discourses perhaps oversimplified a complex process.

We can, however, generalize to theory, and ultimately this is helpful for land managers. This research indicates that the dichotomous assumptions about the way nature is valued (e.g., utilitarianism versus preservationism) can be expanded with Fine's (1998) model. Obviously, the processes involved with the intersection of identity, recreation and wildland fire are more complex than Fine's three discourses indicate. Defining a middle-ground idea such as organicism, however, moves in the right direction by providing a stronger representation of these relationships. Early literature (e.g., Cortner & Gale, 1990; Davis & Marker, 1987) on the human dimensions of wildland fire (i.e., late 1980s-early 1990s) called for examining and learning as much as possible about people's efforts to make sense of the phenomenon including the human culture that emerges around it and not just the science:

Working toward resolution will require defining the sociopolitical dimensions of the problem and looking toward sociopolitical solutions as well as technical and engineering solutions. The wildland fire fighter does not have exclusive rights to the problem. There are multiple owners. Above all else it is a people problem. (Cortner & Gale, 1990, p. 254)

Some researchers have examined this people problem by studying the potential threat of wildland fire to outdoor leisure activities through an economic lens (Englin, Loomis & Gonzalez-Caban, 2001; Starbuck, Berrens & McKee, 2006). Others have done so from the perspective of attitude change theory (Kneeshaw et al., 2004a; Kneeshaw et al., 2004b). We argue that the research can go further. By better understanding how people are negotiating the intersection of leisure, place and wildland fire, then identity processes and what Fine (1998) labeled naturework can be uncovered. The evidence of organic discourse per se is not a key finding in this study, but rather this research illustrated alternative ways in which some people deal with tensions in their own sense of relationships to nature, place and leisure.

This study could help land managers charged with sorting out wildland fire issues by identifying and describing these potentially competing discourses. In a practical way it provides managers with another category (i.e., organic) for understanding how recreationists are interpreting wildland fire, which could result in a more inclusive public policy framework. More than just another take on the issue, recognizing an organic perspective might provide middle ground that neither excludes nor elevates humans. The perspective finds a place for people in a largely undeveloped environment, which includes wildland fire. As Fine (1998) points out, these people might be thought of as charismatic "moral entrepreneurs" (p. 259) or leaders in their WUI communities. Land managers might identify and enlist the aid of organic community leaders such as Ken, Scott and Stacy to help other WUI recreationists face the challenge of accepting and adopting strategies to acknowledge a role for wildland fire in and around their favored recreational places. The phrase that comes to mind is that of "good neighbor." Rather than, in a humanist way, considering how land managers can subdue wildland fire, removing it as a threat, or in a protectionist

way seeking to excise humans from the equation and ignoring the concerns of people who wish to live and recreate in these natural areas, the organic discourse keeps humans in the equation.

The most important contribution of this study is its demonstration of how a sample of people drew from distinct cultural discourses to negotiate concepts of leisure, place and wildland fire. Two of these discourses were expected, but the third was not. Such research may help land managers better understand identity as process. As more people are drawn to participate in leisure activities in wildland fire prone WUI regions, researchers must continue to investigate this process and provide evidence of identity practices. Doing so will help land managers and researchers further understand the relationship between humans and nature.

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