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The Sociocultural Meanings of Outdoor Recreation Places

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When America's national forests were established near the end to the 19th century, the land set aside was generally far from urban centers. Now, as the end to the 20th century nears, urbanization has spread to the point where some of the national forest lands lay at the doorstep of many millions of urban dwellers and the interstate highway has made much more national forest land only a brief drive from the largest metropolitan centers. The same could be said of the arid lands of the Southwest managed by the Bureau of Land Management. The emergence of these "urban" wildlands has made outdoor recreation in wildland settings more accessible to a much broader segment of society.

Attempts at understanding this diversity, particularly when it reflects differences in cultural and ethnic values, presents new and fundamentally different challenges to the recreation resource professionals. Current research models, concepts, and variables are the product of a subculture of resource management that contains tacit knowledge and assumptions about the nature and meaning of recreation engagements. The resource management community is made up of Americans of mostly Anglo-European ancestry who share a particular outlook on public land policy and management and an implicit understanding of the meaning of recreation and natural resources shared by most Americans of similar ancestry. Further, resource professionals share some basic notions (or at least assumptions) of the meaning and importance of recreational activities to the participants, norms for behavior in public settings, and roles and responsibilities of agency personnel. In essence, the recreation management profession and its research agenda is a product of the cultural identities of the researchers, managers, and "traditional" client groups.

This background leaves most managers ill-prepared to provide recreation opportunities to suit the diversity of cultural values, norms or lifestyles of the recreation clientele.

With culturally diverse populations increasingly involved in wildland-based activities, these wildlands are increasingly the subject of differing and often conflicting meanings, norms, and behaviors. The perspective taken in this paper is similar to the idea offered by Lee (1972) two decades ago. In that paper Lee challenged the assumption that recreation places were "free spaces to be used by all social groups"—a view typical "of those with higher mobility and income" and the policy makers who identify with the same group (Lee 1972:83). Rather Lee argued that outdoor recreation places "may be best understood in terms of the meanings assigned to them by particular sociocultural groups" (Lee 1972:63).

Our purpose is to highlight a growing body of research on the meanings individuals and groups assign to places and identify implications for managing public lands at the wildland-urban interface. What has become a *sociocultural* approach in the environment and behavior literature (Saegert and Winkel 1990) provides a broad framework for describing the linkage between culture or ethnicity and the meanings individuals and groups assign to wildlands. This approach promotes the view that the person is a social agent, rather than an autonomous, need driven individual, who seeks out and creates meaning in the environment. Further, with an emphasis on social interaction, more attention is given to the role of the environment in group formation and maintenance.

Meaning of Place

This chapter is about meaning—how individuals and groups come to assign differing and often conflicting meanings to the same geographic locations, and how meanings serve individual and group needs. While *meaning* is a central concept, few investigators offer definitions. Just phrasing it as a question is awkward: "What is the meaning of meaning?" In psychology the question goes back to at least Osgood's (1952) work on semantic meaning. Osgood defined meaning as "a bundle of components including experiences, images and feelings in addition to information" (Osgood 1952:197). In an environmental context, Stokols and Shumaker (1981:483) offer a definition of meaning as "functional, motivational and evaluative information and impressions associated with particular places." Schroeder (1991:232) distinguishes landscape meaning from preference. Meaning is defined as "the thoughts, feelings, memories and interpretations evoked by a landscape" where preference refers to the "degree of liking for one landscape compared to another" (Schroeder 1991:232).

Saegert and Winkel (1990:457-458) characterize the psychological notions of meaning as conceived "primarily in terms of the categories that people use to organize mentally their physical worlds." In sum, meaning refers to both the cognition and emotions a person or group associates with some place or object.

Place is an equally elusive term. In most writing it is used as an all purpose term for talking about the location (setting) where behavior occurs. Geographers, however, are fond of distinguishing place from space (or mere location). Physical space is said to become place when we attach meaning to it. As Tuan puts it "undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (Tuan 1977:6). Similarly, psychologists tend to emphasize the constructed nature of place as a sociocultural context of behavior in which the person as a social agent seeks and creates meaning in the environment. Sociologists and anthropologists on the other hand, tend to emphasize the role of culture and social structure in defining places. Rappoport for example describes places as providing culturally specific "indicators of social position [and] ways of establishing group or individual identity" (Rappoport 1982:181-182). Eschewing the emphasis on the individual experience of place, Stokowski (1991) argues for greater understanding of how sense of place is socially (and politically) created, shared, and sustained.

Place meanings can be characterized in a number of ways. The specific meanings associated with a place can be described in terms of their content, structure (e.g., complexity, diversity), clarity, and consistency (Leff 1978; Stokols and Shumaker 1981). A particularly useful framework that guides our discussion is suggested by Fournier (1991) who distinguishes three characteristics of object meaning: tangibility, emotionality, and commonality.

Tangibility

Probably the dominant dimension of meaning in the literature, tangibility refers to the degree to which "meaning is primarily objective, tangible, and verifiable through the senses or whether it is primarily subjective, interpreted through experience and dependent on associations"—that is whether "meaning is resident in the object itself or in the mind of the user" (Fournier 1991:738). Gibson (1966) was among the first to make this distinction in his description of a continuum of meaning from concrete to abstract. Concrete meanings are often functional in nature (what Gibson referred to as affordance), reflecting the way an object or place is used. By contrast abstract meanings tend to be symbolic. The symbolic meanings carried by some objects or places are assigned to it by the culture or the individual. Thus, for Americans of European ancestry, wilderness is

supposed to symbolize their frontier heritage (Nash 1982). At an individual level, wilderness may represent cherished relationships and experiences of the past. Whatever the meanings of wilderness are to Americans of Asian, Hispanic, or Native heritage, they are not well understood by the management culture assigned to protect wilderness.

Stokols (1990) takes the tangibility dimension further by contrasting what he describes as an emerging spiritual approach to environmental planning with the more traditional approach that he describes as an instrumental view. From the instrumental view, the quality of an environment is measured by its capacity to promote behavioral or economic goals. Research is viewed as a means to achieve technological solutions to environmental problems. The contrasting spiritual approach to environmental planning views the environment as an end in itself rather than as a tool—"as a context in which fundamental human values can be cultivated and the human spirit can be enriched" (Stokols 1990:642).

The spiritual approach to planning described by Stokols is similar to the concepts of "sense of place" and environmental symbolism emerging in geography and environmental psychology. Sense of place refers to the deep emotional ties associated with particular places such as home and community. Land-use conflicts are often the most divisive when such deeply felt meanings are threatened by resource development (e. g., reservoir construction; Johnson and Burdge 1974). Environmental symbolism refers to the tendency of physical objects and places to gradually acquire social and political meaning through their association over time with particular activities or groups (Stokols 1990). Even a planning document may become a symbol of the planner's identity, power, and status in the eyes of the public that is affected by it (Appleyard 1979), suggesting that symbolic meanings of a place are important, but poorly understood factors in environmental decision-making. In sum, natural resources may have value not only for instrumental purposes, but also as *places* that people are attracted to and even attached to because of their emotional, symbolic and spiritual qualities.

Building on this work, Williams et al. (1992) make the distinction between a commodity and an emotional/symbolic view of recreation resource management. They describe the value of an instrumental or commodity view as "an engineering-like emphasis on the manipulation and control of tangible properties of natural resources to meet recreation needs" (Williams et al. 1992:30). Well suited to the utilitarian philosophy of natural resource managers (Wellman 1987), the commodity view has lead to procedures for inventorying recreation resources (Driver et al. 1987), identifying recreation choices and substitutes (Peterson et al. 1985), and evaluating recreation satisfaction (Williams 1989).

While the commodity view has been useful to managers, it has limitations with its inherent emphasis on recreation resources as means rather than ends (Williams 1989). Also noting that most studies dealing with recreation resource use and quality focus on specific attributes rather than "a more holistic characterization of place or experience," Brown (1989:415-416) calls for more studies "which tend toward the gestalt, rather than the pieces." Wildland recreation settings are very often one-of-a-kind places that cannot be designed, engineered, or reproduced as if they come off an assembly line. The instrumental view perpetuates the notion that recreation settings are theoretically interchangeable, even reproducible, given that the replacement provides a similar combination of attributes. More likely, the substitutability of a place depends to a large degree on the intangible emotional or symbolic meaning attached to it.

Finally, Tuan (1977) addresses the tangibility issue in his suggestion that the nature of environmental experience can be either direct (through the senses) or indirect (through symbolic processes). Jacob and Schreyer (1980:375), applying the concept to recreational conflict, describe differences in mode of experience as reflecting the extent to which the senses are directed toward a "detailed examination of the environment" versus a "broad, sweeping impression" of the landscape. In terms of understanding the meanings attached to using a recreational setting, a common concern regarding mode of experience is the degree to which the occupant focuses on the setting itself versus other aspects of the recreational engagement (Schreyer et al. 1985). For some, the setting may be the experience, but for others, the setting may serve only as a stage for acting on particular social or activity goals.

Emotionality

Where tangibility refers to the degree to which meanings are inherent in the object (place), the emotionality dimension of meaning is largely associated with arousal, felt experience and attachment (Fournier 1992). In the environment and behavior literature, emotionality often focuses on place attachment as an emotional or affective bond between an individual and a particular place that may vary in intensity from immediate sensory delight to long-lasting and deeply rooted attachment (Tuan 1974). Thus, emotionality can be thought of as an indication of the depth or extent of meaning with symbolic and spiritual meanings often associated with high levels of attachment to an object or place.

While many models of place attachment have been proposed (Shumaker and Taylor 1983), two primary conceptualizations of place attachment have come to dominate the literature in environmental psychology (Brown 1987). The first is what Stokols and Shumaker (1981) describe as *place*

dependence. Accordingly, attachment results from an assessment of the degree to which a particular place satisfies the needs and goals of an individual and an assessment of how the current place compares to other currently available settings that may satisfy the same set of needs (i. e., when the occupants of a setting perceive that it supports their behavioral goals better than any known alternative).

Concepts similar to place dependence have appeared in recreation research. Resource specificity as described by Jacob and Schreyer (1980:373) refers to "the importance an individual attaches to the use of a particular recreation resource" and is strongly related to the perception that the setting possesses unique qualities. Schreyer, Jacob and White (1981) describe the functional meaning of a place as the tendency to see the environment as a collection of attributes that permit the pursuit of a focal activity. Notions of resource specificity and functionality, like satisfaction, appear to base the value of a place on its "goodness" for hiking, camping, fishing, scenic enjoyment, and so forth. Though conceptually similar to the instrumental view of settings, terms like *dependence* and *specificity* put more emphasis on the perceived necessity attached to a *specific place* for achieving some goal rather than the suitability of *setting attributes.*

A second view of place attachment has developed around Proshansky's (1978) concept of *place-identity* (Proshansky et al. 1983). Place-identity refers to "those dimensions of the self that define the individual's personal identity in relation to the physical environment" (Proshansky 1978:155). The importance of the physical environment in maintaining self-identity is firmly established in the psychological literature (Korpela 1989; Steele 1988) and is increasingly recognized as a motivation for participation in outdoor recreation (Haggard and Williams 1992: Scherl 1989). Thus, in addition to a place being a resource for satisfying explicitly felt behavioral or experiential goals, places may be viewed as an essential part of one's self resulting in strong emotional attachment to places.

Commonality

Commonality refers to the degree to which meanings are individualized or socially defined and held (Fournier 1991). Some meanings may be held by single individuals, but often form the "perceived social field" of an environment to the extent that they are held in common with other occupants and/or shared through interaction and communication among members of organized groups (Stokols and Shumaker 1981). Though shared meanings allow for effective communication and facilitate social integration within society, in some important contexts (e. g., favorite places or objects) highly personalized meanings may serve an equally valuable function of differentiating the individual from society (Fournier 1991).

The tendency for place meanings to be held in common has been associated with the cultural trait of individualism versus collectivism (Belk 1984; Duncan 1985; Triandis, Bontempo, and Villareal 1988). As Belk notes "Within contemporary Western cultures we are most accustomed to assessing the identity of self and others based on individual characteristic...and various material symbols of individual status" (Belk 1984:754). In contrast, identity within collectivist societies is more often *ascribed* through "fixed expectations based on non-chosen traits such as sex, age, and inherited position" (Belk 1984:754). Duncan (1985), in studies of the symbolic meanings of home, observes that within individualistic societies the house takes on a rich set of social meanings at the individual level. "Status seeking is manifested through a dependence upon private objects to affirm identity because collective markers of identity such as caste and extended family are either very weak or nonexistent" (Belk 1984:135). Duncan goes on to argue that within collective societies the house is not a status object, but serves to incorporate individuals into the social structure by means of belief systems in which the individual is rooted not only to a specific group but to a specific place. Thus, much of the arbitrariness of the group structure is removed by making it appear as if it were a divine rather than a human creation.

Implications for Managing the Wildland-Urban Interface

Natural resource agencies are increasingly challenged by the public to incorporate a broader set of values into their management decisions. The crisis in natural resource management that has spawned "new" forestry is due in no small part to the failure of the resource management profession to understand that the public often forms strong emotional and even spiritual bonds with natural environments that transcend the more tangible values of wood, water, fiber, and even scenery (Schroeder 1992). Managers must begin to recognize that their decisions often have great impact on the symbolic meaning of the landscape — that decisions are not just value based, but identity based (Appleyard 1979).

Recognizing the less tangible meanings of environmental resources can help resource managers understand connections between people and specific places they manage. This can enhance natural resource planning for two reasons. First, resource planning often fails to capture the full range of meaning (especially symbolic meanings) associated with natural resources. Greater recognition of intangible meanings helps managers understand why people care so passionately about the management of a particular resource. It demonstrates that places are more than the sum of interchangeable attributes, rather they are whole entities, valued in their

entirety. It recognizes that resources are not just raw materials to be inventoried and managed as a commodity, but also and more importantly, places with a history, places that people care about, places that embody a sense of belonging and purpose that give meaning to life. Second, resource planning has often failed to satisfy the public, in part, because the plans do not indicate where actions are to take place. Focusing on the symbolic meaning of places reminds resource managers that the public is involved with specific places under the manager's jurisdiction, not just summary tables of acres to be allocated to various uses during a planning cycle.

For addressing a multicultural clientele, understanding the collective meanings various groups attach to places they use for recreation is crucial. For example, some immigrating groups, particularly from Latin America and Asia, are likely to exhibit more collectivist traits relative to the highly individualistic Anglo culture. For them, the use of recreation places more likely involved in group identity and maintenance functions. Anglos on the other hand are more likely to use recreation to express their individual self (Haggard and Williams 1992).

Still, the role of places in maintaining American cultural identity has been a well recognized rationale for environmental preservation (Wellman 1987; Schreyer et al. 1981). Some places (e.g., Yosemite National Park) have the capacity to evoke vivid and very widely held social meanings which Stokols and Shumaker (1981) describe as *social imageability*. Places acquire social imageability to the extent that they are regularly and predictably associated with patterns of individual and/or collective behavior. In terms of popular culture, places like Hollywood, Disneyland, and greater L.A. are examples of places with strong social images. Managers must learn to identify the types of social images associated with outdoor recreation places popular with various user groups.

Similarly, sociological research territoriality involves conflicting place meanings. Lee (1972) describes how the middle class tends to define territories through formal rules of ownership (including rules that govern the use of "public" space) whereas the "propertyless lower class" tends to define territory through knowledge of occupants, events, and situations.

Place meanings may be based on personal emotional ties as in a childhood stomping ground or, more abstract and symbolic, as in the way national parks symbolize our American heritage. For the more abstract symbolic meanings, the value of the place is assigned to it by individuals, groups or society without necessarily involving a strong correspondence between the physical attributes of the place and its meaning. To be effective in the multicultural future the resource management professionals must learn to read this symbolic landscape.

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