

# Using the ‘sense of self-in-place’ construct in the context of environmental policy-making and landscape planning<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Although it is common practice for resource managers to focus on processes by which human activity in the environment may be adapted to ensure the sustainability of natural ecosystems, we often forget that our perceptions of who we are given where we live greatly influence the political context for regional ecosystem management. These shared ‘senses of selves-in-place’ serve as potent mediators in the process of attending to or embracing conservation-oriented practices. The authors argue that citizens’ senses of selves-in-place form the major link between how people appraise communication appeals and how they behave in the environment. Discussion focuses on the significance of the association between a sense of place, how the self gets related to the environment, and sense making related to conservation-oriented advocacy. Past and contemporary empirical studies reveal various elements of the sense of self-in-place construct. In turn, the analysis focuses on the tension that often develops given the desires of local stakeholders in competition with land-use advocates from afar (e.g. industrialists, nongovernmental organizations) by exploring three case studies of regional natural resource conflicts. Conclusions address how a sense of self-in-place analysis could be incorporated into and add value to ongoing natural resource management efforts. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Sense-of-place; Self-in-place; Environmental discourse; Community; Natural resource management

## 1. Introduction

This analysis uses the ‘sense of place’ construct as a foundation for examining the relationship between self-schema and environmental awareness. We believe that it is from the vantage of what we have coined a ‘sense of self-in-place’ that humans understand and process various claims and arguments regarding the human relationship to and responsibilities for managing the natural world. It is also from this perspective that humans position themselves in relation to others advocating particular stances on natural resource management. If we assume that the human dimension of ecosystem management is important, that a central

component of this dimension must involve understanding how people construct their sense of self-in-place in a region.

To the extent our combined senses of place and the environmental self (i.e. the idea of a self-in-place) are reflected in communication, natural resource managers have a powerful tool for adapting policies and information to particular constituencies. Scholars from a variety of fields have remarked upon the utility of using language analysis to probe the relationship between self, society, and natural environment in order to more effectively take on the perspective of target audiences (for example, Cicourel, 1972; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Rowan, 1991; Carbaugh, 1996). In searching for such relationships, researchers peel away the specific subject matter of discourse to suggest basic themes reflecting identifications with where people live, what they value, and how they are situated in reference to the environment. In turn, such themes can become cornerstones in the construction of environmental advocacy. Indeed, the assumption that cognition mediates and

<sup>☆</sup> A version of this paper was presented at the 8th International Symposium on Society and Resource Management, Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA, 19 June 2000.

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biases environmental action has been established in a variety of contexts including risk analysis (for example, Otaway and Thomas, 1982; Keeney and Von Winterfeldt, 1986), littering (for example, Cialdini et al., 1991), energy conservation (for example, Yates and Aronson, 1983), and recycling (for example, Kok and Siero, 1985).

Yet, what we are arguing in this paper is that cognitive representations of the self-in-place form the major link between how people appraise communication appeals and how they behave in the environment.

To advance this argument, we begin by briefly discussing the association between a sense of place, how the self gets related to the environment, and sense making related to conservation-oriented advocacy. We then review a series of diverse empirical studies conducted over the past decade, and reinterpret other quantitative and qualitative examinations that demonstrate elements of the environmental self and its relationship to senses of place. Finally, we apply conclusions growing out of this line of research to contemporary examples of natural resource policy-making. We conclude by suggesting ways in which our analysis could be incorporated into and add value to ongoing natural resource management efforts. Lines of future research are also considered.

## 2. The sense of self-in-place and environmental policy-making

Traditional management approaches for public land have often been accused of breeding distrust in governmental action and promoting what Williams (1995) has called a 'view from nowhere' in environmental policy-making (cf. Cantrill, 1999). Consequently, natural resources agencies in the 1990s began to acknowledge 'the importance of human needs while at the same time confronting the reality that the capacity of our world to meet those needs in perpetuity has limits and depends on the functioning of ecosystems' (Christensen et al., 1996, p. 666; cf. Henderson, 1997). This perspective embraces a variety of values beyond either resource extraction or pristine wilderness preservation and typically acknowledges ongoing human presence within whatever tract of land is being considered for development or preservation (Schroeder, 1992; Bengston, 1994).

Preceding and apart from this evolution in natural resource management, a long tradition of research and analysis — from the musings of Dewey (1925) through the studies of contemporary cognitive psychologists (for example, Mervis and Rosch, 1981; Tversky and Hemenway, 1983; Fiske and Taylor, 1991) — reveals that our conception of the natural environment is framed by our experiences bound to local settings. Our

experiences regarding where we currently live, have resided in the past, or have visited color the ways in which we view and communicate about the environment in general. Experiences in highly urbanized environments reinforce a different lens through which to frame the natural world than may arise from our experiences in, say, pastoral hinterlands.

In addition, within each physical context is a social, cultural world saturated with environmental references by which people form distinct mental constructs that allow them to understand terms, such as 'toxic waste', and phrases dealing with ecology and the environment in particular ways. In short, we all tend to live by Miles' Law: 'Where you stand depends on where you sit' and where we sit is framed by the psychological schema we have for that place called 'home' (Miles, 1978, pp. 399–400, cf. Bird, 1987).

Analyses by a range of practitioners who have advised natural resource agencies (for example, May, 1994; Christensen et al., 1996; Cantrill, 1996a; Daniels and Walker, 1996) acknowledge the links between citizens and the land, and how they are mediated by and mirrored in communication practice. These symbolic transformations of the natural world into interpretive contexts for environmental policy and personal action are thought to play a pivotal role in environmental advocacy (Williams and Carr, 1993; Greider and Garkovich, 1994; Cantrill, 1998a; Schultz, 2000). In order to determine these links, we must identify what meanings are assigned to a local natural environment, and the extent to which and by which means groups negotiate and renegotiate collective agreements about such meanings (cf. Moscovici, 1981; Tajfel and Forgas, 1981). Central to this emerging paradigm is the way in which views of 'the self' grow out of and interact with perceptions of the local environment.

Although the study of how people perceive the larger features in the overall environment is an established focus of inquiry (Craik, 1973; Ward and Russell, 1981; Kaplan and Kaplan, 1982; Purcell, 1986), research concerning the relative salience of conservation values and themes given such perceptions is not as substantial. Anyone needing to work with diverse stakeholders concerning, for example, land use, should acquire some understanding of what elements are configured in persons' cognitive structures for the environment, the extent to which such attributes are jointly held by the public at large, and what (if anything) can distinguish different segments of the larger population. Consequently, there is an emerging recognition among social scientists that as people develop a sense of self, their perceptions of 'place' serve as potent mediators of the degree to which they embrace conservation-oriented practices (for example, Massey, 1994; Williams, 1995; Schroeder, 1996).

If we assume that the human dimension of ecosystem management is important, then a central component of this dimension involves how people construct their sense of self-in-place in a region. Because the perception of place is at least partially rooted in the ground between the self and the environment, it seems reasonable to suggest that landscape-scale ecological initiatives might profit from an incorporation of the construct in their formative stages.

### 3. A sense of place and the environmental self: a brief theoretical background

One approach related to natural resource management on a local scale suggests that a community is a 'created space' that frames values, perceptions, and interactions (for example, Luhmann, 1989; Oelschlaeger, 1992; Orr, 1992). As activists, industrialists, policy-makers, and ordinary citizens discuss and learn about the environment, they craft for themselves collective views in situ, more or less reflected in each person's 'take' on their immediate surroundings. Simons (1993) further contends that such 'places' function as sites for the social negotiation of what may be taken as 'truth' in persons' attempts to understand themselves, their communities, and the world at large (cf. Norton, 1991).

A number of general treatises (for example, Basso, 1988; Stokols, 1990) and studies (for example, Hester, 1985; Carbaugh, 1992; Frech, 1993; Mitchell et al., 1993; Cantrill and Masluk, 1996; Schroeder, 1996; Cantrill, 1998a, 1999) have focused on what has been called a 'sense of place'. Various definitions for the sense of place construct have been offered: Duncan (1994) considers it the personal and collective meanings that intersect at a particular physical site; for Williams (1995), it is the product of imbuing meaning to a location; Tuan (1974) focuses on the affective bonds between individuals and particular places that vary in intensity (cf. Bragg, 1996). Other researchers have specified the ways in which senses of place may differ including the structure and consistency of activity (Stokols and Shumaker, 1981; Vayda, 1983; Haggard and Williams, 1992) and tangibility of objects found in the environment (Steele, 1981; Fournier, 1991).

Regardless of definition or approach, however, many of those interested in the concept seem to agree that a sense of place is the perception of what is most salient in a specific location, which may be reflected in value preferences or how that specific place figures in discourse (Cantrill, 1998a). And, taken together, this family of research suggests that the cognitions people use to relate themselves to the natural and social world are quite powerful in the generation of responses to environmental policies and may serve to distance individu-

als from one another or the agencies that manage the use of natural resources.

There is also an apparent interaction between the temporal and environmental components of a sense of place (Lutwack, 1984; Cantrill, 1998a). That is, one's familiarity with a region seems to mediate the extent to which one highlights either social or natural features in describing a felt sense of place. Several conceptual frameworks growing out of anthropology (for example, Mugerauer, 1989), geography (for example, Agnew, 1989), and sociology (for example, Greider and Garkovich, 1994) suggest that a sense of place will change over time with different features becoming more salient than others. For example, the analysis of Kitayama and Markus (1994) suggests that relative newcomers to a region may view their relationship to a location independent of social relations, whereas those with a longer tenure exhibit interdependent self-construals (e.g. interpersonal relations form the cement that bond one to a place).

The dynamic nature of our sense of place is compatible with the perspective of Cantrill (1992, 1996a, 1998a, 1999) on 'the environmental self' (cf. Roszak, 1992; Cuba and Hummon, 1993; Beeson et al., 1996). Grounded in the work of schema theorists (for example, Cantor and Mischel, 1977; Judd and Kulik, 1980; Hastie, 1981; Taylor and Crocker, 1981; Graesser and Nakamura, 1982; Mandler, 1984; Schmidt and Sherman, 1984; Rothbart and Taylor, 1992), this approach suggests that an individual's sense of self is partially represented by beliefs associating the self with the environment. For example, one perspective suggests that our self-schema evolve via the tacit narratives we create to make sense of life events in systematic, self-serving ways (Gergen and Gergen, 1988). And because these internal autobiographies are the product of social interchanges in and about the environment, and since they are continually in the process of being renegotiated, the environmental self is chronically accessible and always implicated in perceiving environmental problems (cf. Bargh, 1989).

A good deal of research consistently demonstrates the extent to which individuals' existing and experience-bound frames of perceptual reference direct the acquisition and processing of new information. Various scholars have implicitly (for example, Markus, 1977; Rogers, 1982) or explicitly (for example, Nisbett and Wilson, 1977; Langer, 1989) argued that these formative processes are tacit and below the threshold of normal awareness (cf. Morris, 1981). Different bases of experience result in different reactions to different environments, preferences for different types of activities, responses to environmental communications, and assumptions regarding one's vested self-interest in environmental issues (cf. Krause, 1993; Simons, 1993; Mazmannian and Morell, 1994).

Although depictions of nature found in popular culture and other pathways exert influence, it seems clear that our non-mediated experience on a day-to-day basis exerts a somewhat overwhelming influence on social perception. Moerman (1993) contends that our social identities arise out of local settings and are stable only insofar as local patterns of discourse support a particular view of the self in relation to that environment and those within it. Thus, one way of thinking about the relationship between a sense of place (i.e. perceptions of particular socio-geographic sites to which one has an affinity) and the environmental self (i.e. that portion of one's self-construct system associated with the larger environment, seen from the vantage of personal history) is to posit that a sense of place is socially constructed upon an edifice of the environmental self that, in itself, is a product of discourse and experience (cf. Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996).

Perceptions of the self in relation to a local environment can effect problem appraisals in a number of ways. For example, we know that the self exerts a strong referential effect in focusing attention and stimulating memory (for example, Kihlstrom et al., 1988). The analysis of Tichenor (1988) suggests that when we encounter, say, a survey of the perceived gravity of environmental problems, we conclude that the respondents must have reasons for their opinions, which we envision and compare with our own beliefs. And, arguably, what we believe is buttressed by what we encounter in our daily lives (cf. Tybout and Yalch, 1980; Miller, 1982). Thus, the perception of solutions as well as problems seems hemmed in by the way we picture ourselves in relation to our environments.

#### **4. Interpreting research in light of the self-in-place construct: a traditional empirical perspective**

The established turn in social psychology toward a cognitive position regarding conservation has often been referenced in previous studies (see Cantrill, 1993 for a comprehensive review), but not vis-à-vis the specific role of self-in-place. A long-standing tradition in examining the social aspects of environmentalism has been to isolate the socio-demographic correlates of concern for and willingness to solve environmental problems (for example, Tognacci et al., 1972; Buttel and Flinn, 1978; Miller, 1982; Allen and Gould, 1986; Wellman, 1987; Uyeki and Holland, 2000). Yet researchers have not reached total consensus as to the effect of such variables on environmental beliefs or behaviors. For example, although many research groups have found that support for environmentalism is negatively associated with age (for example, Lowe et al., 1980), others have determined a relatively robust

positive relationship (for example, Samdahl and Robertson, 1989; Kirkpatrick, 1990). Furthermore, the research of Albrecht et al. (1982) demonstrates that social factors do not seem to exert a uniform effect upon environmental perception; different individuals selectively embrace competing orientations toward the environment simultaneously. Contradictory findings such as these indicate that perceptual processes beyond the mitigating influences of socio-demographic factors may drive perceptions of the environment.

A number of scholars interested in environmental psychology have advocated a deeper understanding of how information, especially that provided by the mass media, is used by the public in forming a response to environmental exigencies. While it is generally assumed that opinions are at least partially based upon information gleaned from media exposure, environmental information can result in either positive or negative effects on behavior (Ramsey and Rickson, 1976; Allen and Weber, 1983; Shapiro and Lang, 1991). In fact, evidence suggests that the provision of information alone is least likely to promote environmental awareness leading to conservation. A number of studies (for example, Bart, 1972; Novic and Sandman, 1974; Milstein, 1977; Honnold and Nelson, 1979) indicate that, as persons become more informed about environmental problems through the mass media, they may also become much more passive in their concern for that environment. Additionally, Stamm and Grunig (1977) demonstrate that, while the public may know of optimal solutions to environmental problems, they are nonetheless reluctant to adopt those solutions whenever their self-interest is threatened.

Taken as a whole, the findings of many previous studies would seem to warrant at least some concern over the traditional approach to understanding environmental perception. The trend also suggests that perceptions of place and self may hold a key to clarifying persons' general responses to environmental conditions and advocacy, especially insofar as most previous researchers have relied on samples drawn from localized (e.g. community or state specific) populations (Lowe et al., 1980). Some critics suggest that environmental issues are not stable over time and locale (Gilbreath, 1988) and that current, local conditions confound the regression of concerns onto long-term themes of environmental perception. In line with the indictment of Honnold and Nelson (1979) of the lack of specificity concerning the cognitive processes underlying environmental concerns, De Haven-Smith (1988) concluded:

The implication of the mass belief system literature is that the public's environmental concerns and attitudes are probably very narrowly focused and depend more on immediate circumstances than on