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# Assessing SFM values: A tool for describing attachment to place

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## Highlights

- A person's attachment to a place arises out of a combination of socio-cultural and biophysical factors.
- While biophysical elements (such as water, wildlife) can be easily identified by many people, socio-cultural elements (such as jobs, family history) are relatively more important to the development of sense of place.
- Photography can be a useful tool in identifying specific attributes of a place that people value. This can help create a "common ground" understanding between the public and forest managers trying to incorporate public values into land use planning.

**A central challenge** confronting forest managers is the task of incorporating public values into land management planning. Values can often be difficult for the public to communicate and/or for forest managers to understand in a concrete way that allows for their effective integration into forest management plans. Nevertheless, the importance of understanding and including these values into land management is crucial, given that management decisions result in changes that may directly impact these values.

## Sense of place

One area of research that seeks to better express and understand public values examines "sense of place". The phrase "sense of place" refers to the meanings and attachments people hold towards a geographical area as well as their satisfaction with the place. Sense of place develops through experience due to a combination of biophysical (such as water, trees) and socio-cultural (such as family ties, occupation) factors. Place meanings can vary within and between communities, depending on the type of experiences that occur. For example, a forest can be an important place to view wildlife for one person and a source of employment for another. One community may be more attached to the socio-cultural significance of a place while another has greater attachment to the biophysical elements of a place. These differences in place meanings may lead to conflicts in forests: a better understanding of these differences could help minimize the frequency and magnitude of such conflicts.

While sense of place has been a subject of research in disciplines such as psychology and geography for several decades, it is relatively new in natural resource management research. Its place here is relevant as the requirement to include public values into management plans increasingly becomes the norm. While research in other disciplines has increased understanding of how much people are attached to

certain places, considerably less has been done to specify what people are attached to. It is precisely the "what" that can offer natural resource managers something tangible to work with when incorporating public values into planning.

Sense of place is developed out of an interaction of biophysical and socio-cultural elements; however, little research has been done in determining the relative roles each plays in this development. It has been suggested that it may be possible to separate biophysical from socio-cultural components and, in doing so, better understand what attaches people to a place. Values stemming from different elements will likely cause differences in views towards land management issues. Understanding and balancing these different views in management planning is a key challenge facing forest managers.

## Articulating forest users' sense of place

Recent research has sought to identify and characterize particular elements that attach people to a place. The project attempted to determine whether it was possible to separate socio-cultural ties to a place from biophysical ones in order to better understand place attachment. Another goal of the project was to determine how sense of place varies between and within the physical landscape or forest management regime. To accomplish these goals, the team used photography as a means to incorporate public values into planning processes.

## A picture is worth a thousand words

In this research project, residents were given cameras and asked to photograph places of special meaning to them. This technique, called "resident-employed photography" (REP), has been used in other fields such as landscape and urban planning and has proven to be a highly effective tool for capturing and communicating socio-cultural and biophysical elements of a place that are valuable to people.

**Figure 1.** "Thursday Hiking Club Trail", Jasper

***Accompanying text:*** "This next picture is…on the Bald Hills trail. We come back to this area, at least once every year. I hike this with my Thursday hiking group, which can have anywhere from 4-6 people, but this day there was only 4 of us. It's always nice to have more people come along, see it… more people to share with…the people I hike with, they're just other people that I've met. Some of them have grown up here, but they were older than me so the only common denominator really is the fact that we love to hike."

Once photos are taken and developed, researchers conducted interviews with participants, during which time participants were asked to give further details about why they chose to photograph the places they did. This method stands in contrast to other traditional methods of eliciting place attachment information such as mail or telephone surveys and has been said to be more fun and less bothersome for participants. In addition, using photographs with interviews—rather than relying solely on written or spoken words—allows for a more detailed description of why certain spaces are of importance to community members (Figure 1). Photographs coupled with interviews can give clarity to seemingly intangible values

(i.e. spiritual attachment to a place). Photographs can also highlight common special spaces that are held by many community members which can, in turn, aid land managers in including these common places of value into management plans.

Resident-employed photography differs from visitor-employed photography (VEP) in that residents—as opposed to visitors—take the photos. Differentiating between these two groups of people is important as differences between attachments which each group has to a place arise due to varying degrees of familiarity with it. Values elicited from one group have the potential to differ from the other, and recognizing this is important for forest managers attempting to use one or both of these tools to garner more public participation in the planning process.

## Methodology

### Study Areas

Six communities were included in the research project, and four have been processed. Table 1 outlines the findings from four communities—Jasper and Hinton, Alberta, and Rocky Harbour and Deer Lake, Newfoundland. These communities were chosen by the research team for two reasons. First, one of the communities in each province (Jasper and Rocky Harbour) was located within national parks while the other community (Hinton and Deer Lake) was dependant on natural resource commodity production for its economic base. It was thought that differences between management regimes in and around these two types of communities may produce different bases for place attachment. Second, it was hypothesized that differences in the source of attachment (i.e. biophysical vs. socio-cultural) may differ between Newfoundland and Alberta due to their different histories. These differences may result in distinct senses of place that signify contrasting public values towards land management in each area.

### Data Collection

Study participants were non-randomly recruited through local media (newspapers and radio), public meetings, door-to-door solicitation and flyers. In addition, the snowball method—whereby participants are asked to suggest other potential participants—was used. The research team attempted to represent the diversity of each community, especially in terms of age, gender, and length of residence. The breakdown for participation in each community is given in Table 1.

Participants were given disposable cameras and instructed to take 12 photographs of places that were most important to them. They were asked to take two photographs of each place (for a total of 24 photographs) in order to increase the chances of having usable photographs for analysis. Researchers were careful to avoid telling participants what to photograph. They encouraged participants to be creative with their photographs (taking a picture of a gravesite to represent history) and to not feel restricted by circumstances such as time of year (taking a picture of a shed that held snowmobiles to represent winter activities).

| | Total Population | No.of participants | % representation |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Rocky Harbour, NL** | 1066 | 16 | 2 |
| **Deer Lake, NL** | 5222 | 15 | 0.3 |
| **Jasper, AB** | 4301 | 23 | 0.5 |
| **Hinton, AB** | 9961 | 22 | 0.2 |

**Table 1.** Number of participants vs. total population in each of four study communities.

After participant photos were developed, interviews were conducted, during which time participants were asked to explain the photographs they had taken. An interview guide was used to gather general information (i.e. length of residence, age). The rest of the interview used photographs as starting points for discussions and questioning. It was felt by researchers that this open-ended method had the advantage of allowing for a much more personal and elaborate description of the values certain places held for participants.

### Data Analysis

Both the photograph and the interview were used together in the analysis as the photograph alone might not represent the full value of the place. An example of this can be seen in Figure 1 and its accompanying interview dialogue (page 2). In looking solely at the picture, one might categorize it easily as biophysical. However, when the dialogue is added to it, evidence of socio-cultural influences emerge.

## Results

Sense of place research can be useful to forest managers who face the daunting task of incorporating multiple and varied public values into management planning. Indeed, its uses in other land use planning has proven to be highly successful and rewarding.

### Biophysical vs. socio-cultural attributes

This research illustrated that while biophysical features are a significant component to sense of place, they seem to be less important than socio-cultural elements. Additionally, there were some attachments that were seen to be a combination of the two types of elements. For example, people (particularly in rural areas) may engage in social activities (i.e. firewood collection, hiking, snowmobiling) in natural settings.

For many, both the natural and social aspects of such activities are important. Figure 2 illustrates the dual role that two sites played—both of biophysical and social importance.

**Figure 2:** Pyramid Mountain Memories, Jasper

***Accompanying text:*** "Pyramid Mountain. Like, I did so many things up there. It was a beach when I was a kid. It was the party place when I was a teenager. You know, bush parties and that sort of thing up there. Uh, skating parties in the winter…just a lot of really good memories up there."

### Regional and land management variations

It was hypothesized that sense of place in Newfoundland would be more heavily steeped in socio-cultural attributes than in Alberta due to longer settlement periods and more stable resident populations.

The research results confirmed this, although the differences were not as pronounced as had been anticipated. The potential reasons for this finding are discussed in-depth in Beckley et al. (in press).

### *Photography as a tool for eliciting public values*

Asking residents to use photography to describe their sense of place was enjoyable for both research participants and researchers. While photography is obviously not the only way to increase the quantity and quality of public participation, it can convey seemingly intangible values to forest managers in a format that can be used in management planning.

## Management Implications

The photo method employed here can be used as a public consultation tool by forest managers who face the daunting task of incorporating multiple and varied public values into management planning. The photo-employed method described here allows public input (i.e. understandings, knowledge, values) to be clearly shown and described, which can assist forest managers with forest management planning. For example, as part of a public consultation process, citizens could be given cameras and asked to take photos of age classes, stand structural attributes, or forest practices that they like or do not like. The resulting photos and interviews could provide a forest manager with tangible things to work with when trying to incorporate public values into management plans.

This photo method also makes public participation more accessible. Citizens are able to express what is important to them on their own terms, engaging people who may not want to participate in other technically-oriented consultation processes (e.g. because of the use of GIS and/or technical forestry language).

The identification of and/or planning for high amenity areas (i.e. protected areas, special management zones, recreational areas) can be greatly helped by allowing citizens to identify areas of value through photography and interviews. Forest managers should consider that areas identified by citizens are not always those that are ecologically pristine or have high aesthetic value, but that do have a strong socio-cultural connection.

One final implication for management exists: the recognition of the complex nature of people's attachment to places. That is, biophysical and socio-cultural characteristics are both important. This complexity needs to be recognized by forest managers and dealt with appropriately. This may mean incorporating multiple values for a given site (i.e. recreational attributes, wildlife viewing, etc) instead of addressing individual issues (for example, limiting clearcut areas for aesthetic purposes).

## Research directives

- The research project highlighted here is currently entering into Phase 2 and continues to be funded by the SFM Network. In this phase, researchers will employ a modified version of the photo method used in Phase 1 but will more explicitly connect this research to a forest management planning process, using Newfoundland as a study area.
- Future efforts to create maps based on resident photos would be useful to forest managers who are familiar with their usage and who would benefit from having concrete data with which to work.

## Further readings


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