Awakening Place Awareness during a 30-Day Wilderness Leadership Program

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Abstract: Whereas much research has been conducted on the environmental perceptions of outdoor program participants, little research has focused on the experiences of outdoor professionals who facilitate wilderness education programs. The purpose of this study was to explore how outdoor leaders experienced initial person-place relationships as they began a 30-day instructor course with the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS). This study utilized qualitative measures to explore how 14 outdoor leaders understood place awareness during the experience. Data were collected through multiple in-depth interviews and participant observations throughout a 30-day wilderness immersion. This article focuses on the ways outdoor leaders described and formed their awareness of the setting. Two core themes emerged from outdoor leaders’ descriptions of place awareness: “a sense of belonging” and “refining place-memories.” Implications for wilderness leadership are discussed.

Introduction and Rationale

The National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) was founded in 1965 by Paul Petzoldt to train people to safely lead others during extended trips in the out-of-doors. NOLS is the largest backcountry permit holder in the United States and holds courses in 14 different locations around the world. An important aspect of NOLS is its promotion of person-place bonds during wilderness leadership programs (MacLean 2002). Instructor courses are designed for people to refine their outdoor leadership skills and to prepare for potential employment with the school. The NOLS instructor course in this study took place in the Wind River Mountains in the western U.S. state of Wyoming. The purpose of the study was to explore how participants’ experienced their place awareness during a NOLS program.

NOLS instructors are expected to promote environmental stewardship behaviors that protect wilderness for future generations. One way the school promotes environmental ethics is through “helping students foster a sense of place” (Johnson 2002, p. 5). In addition, the school strives to promote environmental ethics through helping students...
Individuals at the beginning of an extended wilderness experience develop a sense of belonging and use memories to interpret and refine their relationships to place.

connect personally with wilderness areas, become responsible stewards of the natural environment, and connect spiritually with the settings in which NOLS courses take place (Johnson 2002). Because the school commonly uses the term sense of place in its literature and pedagogical practices, this concept was deemed most appropriate to explore how members of a NOLS instructor course understand and describe their own person-place relationships.

The sense of place concept may best be understood as the variety of affective and cognitive bonds people form to a particular environment (Low and Altman 1992; Tuan 1974). Literature describes the meanings people attach to places as complex and dynamic phenomena (Relph 1976; Tuan 1977). Human geographer Yu-Fi Tuan theorizes that a space becomes a place “when we get to know it better and endow it with value” (1977, p. 6). The sense of place concept has varied meanings in the literature. For the purposes of this study, a place can be defined as a setting combined with a “deeply affective characterization crystallized from an individual’s emotions, experience, and cultural background” (Cochrane 1987, p. 7).

Although an abundance of place-based research has been conducted with outdoor programs and recreation participants, little research has focused on the meanings professionals in leadership roles attach to natural settings, particularly upon encounter. Additionally, place-based research and related literature has had a tendency to focus solely on spiritual interpretations of nature (see Fredrickson and Anderson 1999; Rockefeller and Elder 1992; Stringer and McAvoy 1992), strength of place attachment and setting preference (Kyle, Mowen, and Tarrant 2004), and has often only explored positive place experiences without considering other ways place meanings are formed (Manzo 2005).

Although this scholarship has helped to better understand the intricacies of people’s connections to outdoor settings, it has not explored the ways people, particularly outdoor leaders, form foundational impressions as they enter wilderness environments for an extended period. If those involved in wilderness leadership wish to better understand the processes by which places become meaningful and better utilize those processes to facilitate their students’ development of place connection, leaders may be able to do so more effectively by understanding how their own relationships to outdoor settings form and evolve.

**Methods**

The researchers used in-depth qualitative interviews and participant observations to explore program participants’ experience of person-place relationships (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). The study utilized a phenomenological perspective, which illuminates “the importance of using methods that capture people’s experience of the world” (Patton 2002, p. 107). Two tenets of a phenomenological perspective are: (1) the importance of phenomenological inquiry resides within the ways people interpret their immediate experience; and (2) the best way to understand the experience of others is to experience it ourselves (Patton 2002). A key methodological component of this study was utilizing interviews and participant observation to capture respondents’ immediate and unfolding interpretation of the sense of place concept in a wilderness setting rather than utilizing retrospective methodologies more appropriate for understanding participants’ reconstruction of meanings after they exit the field. The eight female and six male participants in the study ranged from 21 to 37 years of age. Participants had a wide range of past experiences in outdoor education and wilderness leadership. Three of the participants were instructors for NOLS. Participants in the study were volunteers and were not paid for their involvement. All participants who were invited to participate in the study accepted the invitation.

One of the researchers, a participant in the course, conducted semistructured interviews during the 30-day experience in the field. The researcher interviewed each participant at least twice as time permitted throughout the course. Near the beginning of the course, the researcher facilitated open discussions on the sense of place concept with individuals and groups. Participants were then invited to elaborate on their comments, to describe moments of connection to and disconnection from place, and to describe emotions that may have accompanied those experiences. Some examples of interviewer prompts for elaboration included, “What was that experience like?” “What feelings did you experience during those moments?” Consistent with participant observation techniques, interviews were held in both private and group natural settings.
such as on the trail, inside tents at night, and during meals. All interviews were audiorecorded. Occasionally, participants recorded their thoughts privately without researcher intrusion.

The researchers interpreted the lived experience of this group through the phenomenological procedure of “description-reduction-interpretation” (Lanigan 1988, p. 148). One researcher conducted the interviews, recorded observations, and engaged in key data immersion through transcribing the interviews verbatim after the course. The researcher analyzed transcripts inductively through a process of open coding to identify initial emerging themes and then initiated member checks with four participants to ensure the accuracy of the researcher’s interpretations. Then, both researchers returned to the data independently to move from initial categorization to “distinguish[ing] and identify[ing] the conceptual import and significance” of data units (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995, p. 151).

After repeated readings of transcripts, researchers refined categories that had emerged within and across participants’ responses. Using “analyst triangulation” (Patton 2002, p. 560), researchers compared codes, identified groups of statements that merged with individual themes, and reduced themes through selective coding (Lanigan 1988). Rival explanations and negative cases within the findings (Patton 2002) were intentionally sought to offer multiple ways of understanding data. The interpretation that follows is offered to illustrate the significance of the ways the two core themes, “a sense of belonging” and “refining place-memories,” helped to facilitate a sense of place in a wilderness setting.

Results
Data analysis revealed two primary and interconnected themes that suggest how participants become aware of and facilitate person-place relationships through “a sense of belonging” and “refining place-memories.” The first code indicates an individual her/his awakening awareness to the place, and the second code refers to a tool the outdoor leader uses to facilitate connections to new environs. These themes will be illustrated with data that most clearly represent the ways participants became aware of their surroundings and began developing and trying to articulate emerging connections.

Theme 1—A Sense of Belonging
I think “sense of place” is hiking in the wilderness and when you stop and put up a tent it feels like you’re at home.

Study participants discussed in a variety of emotional registers their awakening awareness of and emerging sense of connection to the Wind River Mountains. For example, on the third day of the course, one participant described his increasing sense of comfort that felt like “home”:

I think sense of place is hiking in the wilderness and when you stop and put up a tent it feels like you’re at home. I think comfort out here, not feeling that you’re away from home.

This experienced outdoor leader identifies a growing connection to the setting when it evokes “emotional” rather than “rational” aspects of self and propels a growing sense of “comfort,” “peace,” and “feeling at home.” Another reflected,

It’s that total connection feeling … it means I could spend 100 more days out here or I could go back right now to the city … or I could die in five minutes … it’s all OK. This is enough.

Many participants experienced their emerging connection to the wilderness environment as an emotional and potent sense of belonging.

For other participants, awareness of the setting awakened as particulars of the physical environment became increasingly familiar:

It’s pretty distinctive terrain, learning about it definitely helps foster a sense of place … having more of an

Figure 1—View from Gannet Peak area. Photo courtesy of Garrett Hutson.
understanding of it in a very tangible way, like what grows here, lives here, and what used to live here, how it came to be the way it is today.

Learning about the “distinctive” elements of the physical terrain fueled this participant’s feelings of connectedness to the Wind River Mountains, its unique flora and fauna, and its natural history. Other respondents also connected knowledge of physical location to increasing place awareness:

I think that each day that passes and each cloud that passes over and sun rises … finding all the different braids in the river and little lakes and seeing the fish … it all adds up … it means I’ll wake up the next day and be closer to the Wind Rivers.

Respondents described moments in which map reading, views of the landscape, or the shape and feel of ice and boulders contributed tangible knowledge of setting particulars. This specific, contextual information fostered awareness of and a sense of belonging in the “Winds.”

Human relationships also fostered participants’ sense of connection to the wilderness environment. Leaders expressed the bonds to land that shared experiences—laughter, watching sunsets, scaling ice walls, fishing—helped form:

to have a relationship with the people around you that you share the land with … for me … it’s an important aspect, because they are part of the environment around you and they are part of the experience, that for me creates a sense of place.

For some, such relationships were integral to forming connections to the physical environment: “I not only have to have a relationship with the environment,” one participant said, “but a relationship with the people involved in the environment.” Both elements were necessary to creating a “complete sense of home.”

Finally, respondents identified factors that interfered with establishing connections:

In the past four days I haven’t been focusing on that [sense of place] at all. I’ve been focusing on the folks around me, how my teaching is … the scene, what’s going on … and I’ve probably only had a few flashes of that, like when we first stepped out of the bus … this is amazing! … The anticipation of how I’m going to feel having been out here … [but] … I’m not feeling super-connected right now to my surroundings. … I haven’t reached that yet, just not enough time.

Insufficient time and psychic space prevented this respondent from experiencing more than “flashes” of connection to her physical surroundings. Another participant explained that feeling “busy” and “drained” before the trip interfered with forming specific attachments with the Winds. The joy he experienced emerged from his general love of the mountains and the outdoors, rather than this specific location. Participants listed teaching responsibilities, talk, books, or glimpsing such signs of civilization as trash or town lights in the distance as distractions from the focus necessary to develop a sense of belonging to the Winds.

These examples demonstrate some of the ways this group of outdoor leaders understood their initial person-place relations within a particular context. A sense of belonging with the setting was a different process for each participant. Yet, this emerging sense of comfort and familiarity appeared to provide a key foundation for the leaders’ person-place relationships to evolve further into longer-lasting and more refined place-based memories.

**Theme 2—Refining Place-Memories**

I’m just starting to be able to sense “a place” in the Wind Rivers, and right now it’s more based on memories than knowledge of the whole area.
For many of the participants, developing a relationship with the Wind River wilderness unfolded through a process of connecting their experiences to memories of other experiences in the outdoors. The following quote evidences the importance of the “relived” experience to a participant who visited the Winds in his past:

“I’m just starting to be able to sense “a place” in the Wind Rivers and right now it’s more based on memories than knowledge of the whole area. When I return to a place that I already know very well, it has a lot of memories … and oftentimes that’s more powerful, it’s like a sense when you smell something or … when you’re back in familiar surroundings and many memories come up based on the surroundings.

The “chill in the air” or the “feel of the ice” stimulate memories that can serve as springboards for establishing connections with new environs or deepening those with familiar settings. Participants also identified memories as a powerful source of constancy and consistency that can impel individuals to protect environments. One outdoor leader expresses his desire to preserve for the common good settings that are significant personally:

“It’s funny because this ecosystem is very similar to Yellowstone, but the rock is very similar to the stuff I’ve grown up on for the last 10 years. So for the last four days I have felt a growing sense of place with the Wind Rivers … but … I have jumped in a greater sense of belonging or sense of knowing this place because it’s so similar to other places that I’ve been.

This participant’s diverse memories of other settings served as points of reference for clarifying what seemed familiar about the Winds and facilitating his sense of belonging, and in turn, his sense of connection to the new setting.

As participants became aware of distinct features of the Wind River Mountains, they often utilized memories of past experiences as reference points for establishing new place relationships. One participant reflects:

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Finally, demonstrating elements of both themes 1 and 2, one outdoor leader captured the layered meanings place could accrue after years of experience and engagement:

“I've been coming here, you know 60 days a year ... so I think what I'm feeling now is high elation. I'm feeling settled and happy about being here, because I'm feeling more familiar with it, but it is also very unique for me to see all the different seasons. ... Since I've gotten to know this place a little more, I've become very comfortable with it. It's exhilarating to be here every time. It seems like there is always something new and some reason to be excited. The first couple of days here always seem weird, but once we get into it further, things will change.

This outdoor leader experiences “elation” and a sense of comfort as he reenters a familiar and meaningful place as well as “exhilaration” when recognizing how elements of the landscape have changed. Actively comparing, contrasting, and refining memories facilitates his relationship to the Winds.

**Discussion**

This study illustrates some of the ways setting awareness awakens as individuals at the beginning of an extended wilderness experience develop a sense of belonging and use memories to interpret and refine their relationships to place. These findings are consistent with research literature that suggest the meanings people attach to places are complex, multifaceted, and are often different from person to person (Bricker and Kerstetter 2002; Jorgensen and Stedman 2001; Kaltenborn and Williams 2002). Further, the results delineate specific ways a sense of belonging and place-memory refinement shape emerging wilderness relationships.

The meanings that participants attached to the Wind Rivers should encourage wilderness leaders to pay careful attention to the initial place impressions of others during the programs they facilitate or manage.
impressions of others during the programs they facilitate or manage. As mentioned, related literature has often focused on the spiritual dimensions of the wilderness experience (Frederickson and Anderson 1999; Graber 1976; McDonald 2003; Roberts 1996), with less focus on perhaps more ordinary aspects of becoming acquainted with a particular wilderness setting through developing a sense of belonging, or the role that memories of past wilderness experiences can play as supported by the findings in this study. Furthermore, it’s worth noting that adjusting to the stress of a wilderness expedition caused outdoor leaders in this study to feel distracted from their surroundings. Indeed, Koesler (1994) found that anxiety levels of NOLS students before the start of courses affected their perceived self-efficacy within wilderness environments. If outdoor leaders can actively help students to enter the wilderness as comfortably as possible, they may be able to temper students’ anxiety and stress and maximize their programs’ effectiveness in facilitating connectedness to wilderness surroundings—a goal of NOLS.

NOLS aspires to help students find their own sense of place during wilderness leadership programs so they may transfer positive feelings toward wilderness settings to other outdoor environments. Other studies focus on student-reported learning during NOLS courses help in clarifying the learning process and outcomes that occur within wilderness education contexts (see Paisley, Furman, Sibthorp, and Gookin 2008). As organizations such as NOLS continue to explore the particulars of student outcomes related to environmental perceptions and stewardship, greater specificity will be needed to understand the place perceptions of those who facilitate NOLS experiences. This phenomenological study offers a beginning to understanding the ways outdoor leaders initially forge meaningful relationships with a wilderness environment. IJW

References

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