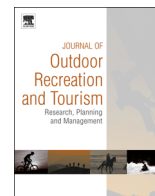




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# Local communities and protected areas: The mediating role of place attachment for pro-environmental civic engagement



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## ABSTRACT

Managers and researchers agree on the importance of understanding the nature of humans' attachment to place in order to reduce environmental impacts in protected areas. Attachment has been discussed as having implications for pro-environmental behaviors directed at protecting natural resources and informing sustainable recreation and ecosystem management. Accordingly, this study examined whether residents' (who might also be park visitors) attachment to a place (i.e. a national park) mediated the relationship between community attachment and engagement in participatory resource management.

Drawing on responses from 239 residents in communities surrounding Retezat National Park in Romania, place attachment, community attachment, and pro-environmental civic engagement behavioral beliefs were hypothesized as independent variables. A high correlation was observed between place attachment factors, place identity and place dependency which suggested a weak differentiation of the two factors. Pro-environmental civic engagement intentions were found to vary depending on residents' beliefs regarding pro-environmental civic engagement and level of place attachment. Both community attachment and park related place attachment played a role in predicting citizens' levels of pro-environmental civic engagement beliefs. Parks that are perceived to have a level of mutual benefit and co-management generate more support toward conservation and recreational use goals.

## MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

Local residents represent a key stakeholder group for parks and protected areas because of their constant interaction with the setting through recreation and other activities. This study reveals the importance of understanding the social environment within communities proximal to a park and how social perceptions can shape attachment to a protected area with implications for pro-environmental civic engagement beliefs and intentions to sustain natural resource protection. Programs and initiatives designed to increase local residents' attachment to their community (e.g. through recreation programming, special events like concerts, wildlife oriented walks, nature oriented games) should be encouraged and supported by park managers.

Allowing some carefully managed and zonal extractive uses of the park also facilitates more positive social connections and attitudes toward the park, as long as other extensive park area resources are protected and basic principles of sustainability and conservation are followed. Based on responses to the civic engagement beliefs and intention items in this study, it would also be advisable to provide opportunities for local residents to participate in meetings, public hearings, community projects and management decisions, to sustain trust in park managers, which is very important to local impressions of a park and positive park attachment attitudes.

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## 1. Introduction

Although some large parks are located in remote wilderness areas, many have rural communities that have either historically predated

the park and have been affected by protected area designation, or have attracted additional population and tourists due to the presence of the park. Historically, many parks and protected areas have been viewed as islands of biodiversity conservation with little or no connection to nearby human lives. More recent studies have shown that successful park management depends on the collaboration, involvement and support of local communities (Andrade & Rhodes, 2012; Barkin & Bouchez, 2002; de Beer & Marais, 2005). Local communities adjacent

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to national parks and protected areas are increasingly perceived as having a substantial role in achieving conservation and sustainability goals, due to their on-going interactions, through resource uses, recreation opportunities, and familiarity with surrounding environments (Manfredo, Vaske, Bruyere, Field, & Brown, 2004; Schelhas, Sherman, Fahey, & Lassoie, 2002).

Local community involvement in the management of protected areas usually leads to increased awareness of the benefits of biodiversity, more responsible use of resources, and welfare of local people (Pagdee, Kim, & Daugherty, 2006). A perceived lack of community participation and engagement in biodiversity conservation and outdoor recreation has been suggested as a constraint for natural resources management in Romania (Cutumisu, 2003). This has been primarily attributed to a weak sense of community and collective responsibility that characterizes Romanian rural communities (PJB Associates, 2006), and lack of conservation attitudes and care for the environment (Kuijs & van den Bergh, 2006).

Place attachment is one of the key concepts at the roots of community action that ultimately fosters community development and sustainable resource management (Wilkinson, 1986, 1991; Trentelman, 2009). Community attachment has been noted to be strongly rooted in involvement in local social relations, but the importance of natural environments in shaping community attachment has also been emphasized (Hummon, 1990; Stedman, 2003).

Places in the natural environment where we recreate and share family outings can be perceived as settings rich in meanings which support attitudes and behaviors towards protecting the resource (Cheng & Monroe, 2012; Davis, Green & Reed, 2009). Past research shows that when people care and are attached to a setting, they have inclinations to protect the setting through involvement in resource protection (Bonaiuto, Carrus, Martorella, & Bonnes, 2002; Halpenny, 2010; Williams, Patterson, Roggenbuck, & Watson, 1992). Understanding the attachment residents hold for a neighboring park can facilitate management initiatives directed at improving the recreation experience for park visitors, protect the resource, and also facilitate better communication between various interest groups.

Sampson and Goodrich (2009) and Stedman (2003) propose that communities serve as a catalyst through which individuals develop a sense of identity and dependence with a place. Thus, focusing on the importance of public involvement in the sustainable management of protected areas in a Romanian context, and the need to better understand the relationship between community and place attachment, this study explores the role of emotional investment with a neighboring park, from the perspective of place attachment mediating the relationship between community attachment and engagement in participatory resource management initiatives.

## 2. Review of literature

McCleave, Espiner, and Booth (2006) acknowledge the value of understanding relationships between people and parks for effective management, community support of conservation initiatives, social wellbeing, and tourism and recreation development. Lucas (1982), Zube and Busch (1990) and Kappelle (2001) proposed a series of frameworks to capture various aspects of people–park relationships. The primary identified dimensions are lifestyle and values, place attachment, recreation, tourism, attitudes and interactions with park management agency, local participation in park management and operations, and traditional land uses. The emotional connections between people and their environments captured through concepts such as benefits derived from park visits, community and place attachment provide insights on people–park relationships including pro-environmental behaviors.

### 2.1. Place attachment

The concept of place attachment highlights the affective connections people can have with a place, connections commonly viewed as grounded in place dependence and place identity (Kyle, Bricker, Graefe, & Wickham, 2004a; Williams et al., 1992). Place dependence is based on place being valued for its attributes which are viewed as supportive of personal goals and activities, while place identity is the emotional and symbolic representation of a place grounded in personal attitudes, values, thoughts, beliefs, meanings, and behavioral tendencies towards the physical environment (Williams et al., 1992). Kyle et al. (2004a) found that the greater the social ties to a setting, the higher the emotional attachment (identity) with the setting.

Place attachment has been viewed as emerging from the interaction with the setting, interactions driven by interest to satisfy latent needs (Kyle, Mowen, & Tarrant, 2004b). Interactions with the natural environment often occur in the context of outdoor recreation experiences which accordingly hold an important significance for human-natural resources bonds. Positive relationships have been found between recreational activity and increased park visitor attachment towards the recreation resource visited (Bricker & Kerstetter, 2000; Hammit, Backlund, & Bixler, 2004; Moore & Graefe, 1994). Furthermore, a series of motivations for participating in outdoor recreation were found to be associated with increased attachment to a setting, as a result of increased interaction with the park environment (Kyle et al., 2004b). Recreationally derived meanings were also found to be linked to place attachment (Kil, Stein, Holland, & Anderson, 2012; Wynveen, Kyle, Absher, & Theodori, 2011).

The social interaction occurring in park settings contributes to increased connections and shared experiences between participants which ultimately translate to higher attachment to the setting where the social experience occurred (Mesch & Manor, 1998). Thus, several authors emphasized that meanings and attachments associated with a resource are the result of interactions with the environment (through recreation and other activities) and the social group present during the activity (Eisenhauer, Krannich, & Blahna, 2000; Milligan, 2003).

### 2.2. Community attachment

Community attachment captures the emotional connections residents have to their community that ultimately generates a sense of belonging and rootedness (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974). Community attachment, as defined by Hummon (1992), is an emotional investment in a locality. Research depicts community attachment as being rooted in length of residence, participation in community activities and groups, social connectedness, and various socio-demographic characteristics, such as age, family status, number of children, income, and education (Brehm, Eisenhauer & Krannich, 2006; Brennan, 2007; Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; Trentelman, 2009). Furthermore, residents' strength of social connectedness operationalized as the extent of social interaction with co-citizens was found to be a strong predictor of community attachment (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; Brehm et al., 2006).

Sociological analyses have generally captured social connections as being at the foundation of community attachment, even while recognizing the ability of the natural environment to support social integration (Wilkinson, 1991). Farnum, Hall, and Kruger (2005) argued that the more time people spend in their communities and the more they appreciatively interact with natural environments, the stronger the emotional connection with their community. Arnberger and Eder (2012) found community attachment to be influenced by perception of green space and green space use, in addition to perception of the community and community experience. Thus, community attachment is perceived to be rooted in assessments of the physical characteristics of the community and not just the social environment in the community. Communities exist as the local environments that

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