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Sense of place: A process for identifying and negotiating potentially contested visions of sustainability

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ABSTRACT

This article identifies opportunities and challenges to using sense of place as motivation for long-term stewardship at multiple spatial scales in a rapidly changing world. Sense of place reflects processes by which individuals or groups identify, attach to, depend on, and modify places, as well as the meanings, values, and feelings that individuals or groups associate with a place. These associations with place are fluid through time as they are felt, imagined, interpreted, and understood. Sense of place appears to most strongly motivate stewardship actions at local scales under circumstances where people value a place for the same reasons, and the conditions of the place are deteriorating. We suggest that well-recognized actions that build place attachment could create a reservoir of potential stewardship, if locally valued places were to deteriorate, as, for example, in response to climate change. Sense of place does not always promote stewardship, however, because attitudes may not lead to actions, some actions do not promote sustainability, and different place identities in the same place may lead to different stewardship goals (e.g., conservation vs. development). In situations where sense of place is deeply contested, we suggest that stewardship is best fostered by transparent and respectful dialogue to identify shared values and concerns and negotiate areas of disagreement. As a result of increased human mobility and globalization, individuals interact with many places to satisfy their desires and needs. We suggest that this opens new opportunities to motivate stewardship of types of places at regional, national, and global scales. Approaches such as discourse analysis, boundary concepts, incompletely theorized agreement, and common property theory that explicitly address contested concepts might contribute significantly to fostering sustainability in a rapidly changing and deeply divided world.

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1. Introduction

The ecological impacts of a growing human population and rising aspirations and capacity for consumption have

contributed to a global decline in the benefits (ecosystem services) that society receives from ecosystems (MEA, 2005; Rockström et al., 2009). Although the causes of environmental degradation are increasingly understood, processes that might foster a shift toward more sustainable trajectories are

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poorly defined. Laws and regulations that punish unsustainable actions (e.g., regulation of water pollution) and market approaches that align economic incentives with sustainability goals (e.g., payment for ecosystem services or green certification programs) can motivate more sustainable resource use (Kinzig et al., 2011) by focusing on policy and market instruments that incentivize desired outcomes. However, society's resource-use decisions are not motivated solely by economic self-interest or fear of punishment. Regulations and payment for ecosystem services may marginalize other, more fundamental motivations for valuing and relating to nature or may undermine alternative cultural approaches to stewardship (Berkes, 2008; Louv, 2005; Raymond et al., 2013).

A complementary approach is to capitalize on the attachment that people feel to particular places or attributes (e.g., biodiversity) as a motivation for environmental citizenship. Can this “sense of place” provide a foundation for stewardship strategies by providing insight into the processes that link people's place attachment to their actions?

Earth-System and Integrated Assessment Models that seek to incorporate an understanding of the linkages between people and places at large scales generally focus on biophysical, economic, and demographic dimensions (Michetti and Zampieri, 2014; Schneider, 1997) and ignore the intervening social processes. In this paper, we seek to bridge the gap between the fine-scale understanding of psychological and social processes that connect people to places and the urgent need to foster long-term stewardship at scales ranging from local places to the planet (Chapin et al., 2009; Folke et al., 2011; Turner et al., 2003)

2. Complexities of sense of place, stewardship, and sustainability

In simple terms, sense of place can be defined as “the collection of meanings, beliefs, symbols, values, and feelings that individuals and groups associate with a particular locality” (Williams and Stewart, 1998). It is the meaning or importance of a place based on human experience, social relationships, emotions, and thoughts (Stedman, 2003a; Tuan, 1977). However, this definition fails to capture the contextual and dynamic nature of sense of place. “Places are ... interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined” (Gieryn, 2000). Sense of place reflects not only experiences with places but also the cultural, religious, historical, and personal meanings of places and the power and economic relationships that shape historical and current interactions with places. Together, these feelings may build attachment to a place in ways that contribute to and are affected by a person's or group's identity and worldview (Ardoin, 2006; Fresque-Baxter and Armitage, 2012; Lewicka, 2011; Tuan, 1977; Williams and Stewart, 1998; Yung et al., 2003). For example, families of fishers, ranchers, farmers, and foresters who have lived in the same place for generations often feel strong attachment to their place.

Most writings about sense of place treat it as a psychologically and socially constructed process. The foundational writings of Tuan (1977), for example, differentiate between “space,” which is the physical environment and “place”, which is imbued with experiential, narrated, and imagined

meanings. Others note the additional importance of biophysical and aesthetic attributes of place that draw people to particular locations and provide the opportunity for people to derive meaning from them (Jackson, 1994; Ryden, 1993; Shields, 1991; Stedman, 2003a). There are therefore multiple, sometimes competing, discourses about sense of place (Arts and Buizer, 2009). By this we mean both alternative framings of sense of place (Schön and Rein, 1994) and alternative social practices, including objects of knowledge, social relationships, institutional arrangements, and power processes (Foucault, 1994; Fischer, 2003; Arts and Buizer, 2009). In this sense, sense of place is a boundary object or concept that can facilitate learning and communication across disciplines and between theoreticians and managers (Star, 2010), while at the same time acting as a barrier to consensus among disciplines or social groups as to its definition or utility in fostering stewardship. We return to this tension in the Conclusion.

The dynamic interactions among the many influences on sense of place and the fluid changes in these interactions through time (Gieryn, 2000) lead to substantial variation within and among stakeholder groups in reasons for valuing particular places and therefore the potential for conflicts, as often seen in debates over conservation vs. development among people who value the same place (Ardoin, 2006; Cheng et al., 2003; Davenport and Anderson, 2005; Stedman, 2003b; Yung et al., 2003). Sense of place is therefore often contested and not a simple panacea for stewardship, as sometimes assumed by environmental advocates (Heise, 2008). In addition, sense of place can motivate parochialism and exclusionary practices, as seen in NIMBY (not in my backyard) attitudes and gated communities (Gieryn, 2000; Relph, 2008) that can amplify economic and political disparities. Given the enormous complexity of sense of place and its potential to motivate both good and ugly social behaviour, how can it possibly be a constructive framework for stewardship?

Like sense of place, sustainability and stewardship are boundary concepts that have no single definition or agreed-upon utility. Sustainability emerged as a goal to link conservation and development outcomes for long-term societal benefit of developing nations (WCED, 1987). However, the term has also been applied more narrowly to economic growth, social wellbeing, ecological stability, or a combination of all three. Similarly, stewardship has been defined both as a framework for actively shaping trajectories of ecological and social change (Chapin et al., 2011) and as a religious and moral basis for social action (Kearns and Keller, 2007). Like other boundary objects, sense of place, sustainability, and stewardship may be useful as incompletely theorized frameworks if they allow communication and cooperation to emerge among groups that have apparently conflicting worldviews (Star, 2010; Sunstein, 1995; see Section 5).

3. An integrated framework

3.1. Scope, approach, and definitions

In this paper we focus on the relationships between people (individuals, groups, communities) and ecosystems (both wild and inhabited landscapes). We do not address the interactions

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