



Love of the land: Social-ecological connectivity of rural landholders



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ABSTRACT

Understanding how landholders relate to the land and water they manage is crucial to sustainable natural resource management policy and practice. This study focuses on the relationship that rural landholders, both producers and rural lifestyle, have with their land and waterways, to provide insight into a social-ecological dynamic that contributes to social resilience. Mixed qualitative methods of semi-structured interviews and photovoice are used to examine stewardship; place attachment and constituent components of affective, functional and cognitive connection; as well as sense of community, through a case study in the Mary River valley in South-east Queensland Australia. Powerful visual images from participant-derived photos illustrate rural landholders' views of the intertwined connections of landscapes and communities and their 'love of the land'. The study thus expands the breadth of methods used in investigating place attachment. It contributes to the theoretical understanding of how the integrated nature of stewardship, place and community build and maintain social resilience. Understanding landholder relationships and motivations as part of a social-ecological system can enable better targeting of land management support.

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1. Introduction

Understanding the interaction between humans and their choices about how to manage the land and ecological systems is essential for sustainable land and water development (Rammel et al., 2007; Fulton et al., 2011). Social-ecological systems are dynamic and continuously changing (Berkas and Folke, 1998; Scheffer et al., 2009) through interactions between actors, institutions, and resources shaped by a given social-ecological setting (Holling and Gunderson, 2002). This requires recognition of the coupled nature of social and ecological systems, which is inextricably linked and critical for sustainability (Liu et al., 2007). The ability of such systems to co-evolve whilst maintaining core functions is referred to as socio-ecological resilience (Davidson et al., 2016; Holling and Gunderson, 2002). Yet only recently has people-place connection been highlighted as one of the key attributes of resilience in social systems (Ross and Berkas, 2014; McManus et al., 2012). Herman (2015, p. 103, following Maclean et al., 2014) defines social resilience as 'the way in which individuals, communities and society adapt, transform and potentially become stronger when faced with environmental, social, economic or political challenges'. From a

practical perspective, this involves understanding the ways in which individuals and groups act as stewards of the environment to foster these relationships (Pilgrim and Pretty, 2010). We investigate this with reference to an Australian farming community.

Traditional family farms and their farmers are part of a community, often quite small in population, where they play an important role in supporting local businesses and contributing to community well-being¹ (McManus et al., 2012; Hildenbrand and Hennon, 2005). Their identity is derived from being a farmer: having an intimate understanding of the land, their animals and machinery and having such good business acumen, proficient land management, and risk management strategies that they can sustain a viable farm and provide 'food for the nation' (Kuehne, 2012; Baldwin, 2011; Halpin and Guilfoyle, 2005). Others refer to farmers' motivation for caring for their land: it makes business sense to take responsibility for the state of the environment (water, soil, pollinators, etc.) on which they depend (Herman, 2015), and to demonstrate that they manage their operations consistently with

¹ In Australia, people in farming families are more than twice as likely as those in other families to do voluntary work for an organisation or group (39% compared with 19%) (ABS, 2011). The rate of volunteering is also higher among those who live in smaller communities - 27% among those who live in areas of less than 1000 people, compared with 17% of those who live in cities larger than one million people (ABS, 2011).

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the broader aspirations of society (Baldwin, 2011). Likewise, rural landholders who do not make their living from the land, often referred to as 'lifestylers' or amenity residents, also form a significant relationship with their land, with strong attachments forming irrespective of length of time in the location (Smailes, 2002). Just as farmers have diverse motivations and practices, so do lifestyle residents. Gill et al. (2010) suggest that promoting stewardship needs to take into account the diversity of values and practices that are 'shaping ecologies at the landscape and property scales' (Gill et al., 2010, p. 332). Thus a range of rural landholder types can demonstrate their desire to care for the land in different ways.

The concept of stewardship captures the role of the land manager in providing for broader public benefit and future generations, of creating a legacy to the broader community, land and water, as well as to one's own family, while still acknowledging private or self-interest benefits. To support community based Natural Resource Management (NRM) in general, it is thus important to understand what might motivate rural landholders in the future to engage in stewardship. Whilst Landcare, catchment, and NRM groups² have fostered social-ecological resilience in rural areas through both individual and group-based approaches to land restoration and biodiversity on both private and public land, gradual reforms (primarily in governance and funding) have reduced their capacity to do so (Curtis et al., 2014; Robins and Kanowski, 2011). Delivering ecological benefits in rural landscapes requires a better understanding about the values and behaviour that bond communities and cultures, people and places with environment, in order to enhance the system resilience (Ross and Berkes, 2014, p. 17).

This article focuses on rural landholders' relationship with their land and waterways to provide insight into a social-ecological dynamic that is often neglected - the interwoven care and concern about place and community. We explore people–place relationships of rural landholders through a case study in the Mary River valley in South-east Queensland Australia, as expressed through visual and dialogical methods, comparing results of an emerging technique, photovoice, with interview outcomes. Our contribution is two-fold. Firstly, we add to the body of evidence that illustrates the complex connection of rural landholders to both place and community as a social-ecological system, advancing understanding about the dynamics of people–place relationships in terms of socio-ecological systems resilience. In times of shrinking budgets for land management, understanding landholder motivations will enable targeting management support more appropriately. Secondly, we illustrate the utility of the technique, photovoice, in revealing rural landholders' views of the affective or emotive connections of landscapes and communities through powerful visual images. This therefore contributes to the existing toolbox for assessing and understanding resilience dynamics, particularly the people and their relationship with their social and physical environment.

2. Literature review

As an inherent characteristic of socio-ecological systems, high resilience means tipping points that result in less desirable (e.g. less productive) states are less likely. In their seminal work, Gunderson and Holling (2002) identify that resilience is associated with high

levels of biodiversity and socio-ecological inter-connectedness, and more flexible and adaptive land management practices. Thus, understanding how these connections are formed, maintained and regenerated in rural communities is critical to supporting socio-ecological systems resilience. We draw on two areas of environmental psychology research – 'connection to place' and 'sense of community' to form a better understanding of connection, grounded in a practical context.

2.1. Connection to place

To further understand the relationship of rural landholders to land, we refer to the substantial research in environmental psychology, geography, and other literature about place attachment, or the emotional bond between person and place (Florek, 2011). Since Altman and Low's seminal work (1992), many authors (e.g. Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001; Hernandez et al., 2007; Raymond et al., 2010; Lewicka, 2011; Scannell and Gifford, 2010) have identified a range of social and physical dimensions that provide insight to place attachment. However, the physical process of connection, which includes the mechanisms that enable place attachment to develop, has been largely neglected (Lewicka, 2011). Three components - affect, cognition, and behaviour, derived through various empirical studies (e.g. Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001; Scannell and Gifford, 2010; Lin and Lockwood, 2014) can usefully articulate and contribute to the gap in understanding the process that builds place attachment. This is important for building connection that helps to maintain socio-ecological resilience.

The first component, *affective* attachment is a socially constructed deep emotional tie to or investment in place, a part of one's personal identity. It can be based on genealogical linkage, family tradition, history of social interactions, and experiences with friends and family with a place evidenced by narratives and special memories. It might be 'home' or enhanced by ownership. Such people-place bonding is often described in sensory, aesthetic, spiritual, or emotive terms, expressed as happiness and love, pride and well-being (Scannell and Gifford, 2010). Affective attachment can also be expressed by negative emotions of sadness, longing and grief associated with displacement or place impact (Scannell and Gifford, 2010).

*Functional*³ attachment is grounded on behavioural interactions through practice of activities (such as farming, recreation, rebuilding and restoration), satisfying an important personal need, purpose or goal. It can be life sustaining, provide economic and lifestyle benefits through living, working, and raising children in a place. It too might be fostered by property ownership and be related to landscape characteristics such as good soil. It is expressed as the desire to remain close to a place, return to a place or relocate to a similar place (Scannell and Gifford, 2010).

Cognitive attachment is based on constructed meaning and intellectualised interpretations of a setting's physical attributes, such as perceived degree of naturalness or cultural history. It can include knowing and understanding details of the environment. It is incorporated into self-identity if the type of place matches personal values (Scannell and Gifford, 2010). It provides insight into why a place is valued or meaningful (Wynveen et al., 2012).

Connection or attachment is a multi-dimensional concept based on individual and/or collectively held meanings, a psychological process involving cognition and behaviour, linked with place characteristics (Scannell and Gifford, 2010), through a reciprocal relationship between their behaviour and experiences (Rollero and

² NRM groups and catchment management groups are spatially delineated around a river basin and rely on both paid workers and volunteers for stewardship activities. Members of over 4000 locally-based community Landcare groups in Australia volunteer to care for the natural resources in partnership with other organizations.

³ Referred to as behavioural attachment by Jorgensen and Stedman (2001).

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