



Place meanings and rock climbing in outdoor settings



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ABSTRACT

This article presents the place meanings that 21 rock climbers from Western Canada ascribe to outdoor climbing sites. It takes the form of an interpretive inquiry based on semi-structured interviews through which interviewees provided narratives about their climbing experiences. An analysis of these narratives identified eight place meanings (accessibility, site attributes, variety, social interactions, mecca, learning, exploration, and escape) which were grouped into three dimensions (physical site, social, and experiential). As these themes suggest, the place meanings of climbing sites are complex and multidimensional as articulated by the climbers. Specifically, climbing places were physical places associated with the act of climbing, exploring the site and social interactions that included group inclusion and avoidance.

Management implications: The concept of place meaning can offer resource managers with important qualitative information about rock climbing sites and rock climbers:

- Provides insights into how climbers perceive the importance of specific climbing places;
- Provides a qualitative sense of the various desired climbing outcomes such as solitude, escape, learning and interactions with others; and
- Enhances the development of intimate connections with the wider aspects of the climbing sites beyond the narrow aspects of climbs/routes (i.e. the landscape).

Management may use these insights for the benefit of site planning and management to increase the satisfaction of climbers, and for marketing by positioning their climbs vis-à-vis other routes.

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1. Introduction

Many recreation and sport activities have a strong traditional association with the natural environment. Rock climbing is one such activity. It is an increasingly popular recreational pursuit (Attarian, 1999; Glendinning, 2005; The Outdoor Foundation, 2014), yet the “place meanings” that climbers have for climbing sites have not been investigated in depth. In the context of this study, place meanings are specific conceptualizations that individuals and groups express towards climbing sites and settings. By understanding place meanings, we can comprehend resource users' site-specific perspectives (Wynveen, Kyle, & Sutton, 2012). These meanings are of importance due to the “role of place and how it influences recreation choices” (Kruger, 2006, p. 385). Decisions of resource managers can influence established place meanings as part of a person's experience of those places. Conversely, place meanings can influence management

decisions. Therefore, this paper will contribute to reducing the gap in the literature concerning place meanings and adventure activities.

2. Literature

2.1. Place

Discussions of place often begin by distinguishing place from space. Crouch (2000) explained that, “[s]pace can be a background, a context, a ‘given’ objective component of leisure and tourism” (p. 64). Likewise, Smale (2006) clarified that space is defined by physical characteristics and geographical markings whereas place is associated with meanings that are created, explained and interpreted by people using those spaces (Crouch, 2000; Kruger, 2006; Stewart, 2008). These meanings are composed of evaluations and representations that provide significance to the physical settings (Farnum, Hall, & Kruger, 2005; Spartz & Shaw, 2011). Place meanings are “thoughts, feelings, and emotions individuals and collectives express toward place” (Kyle & Johnson, 2008, p. 111). Places can have multiple meanings that are not specific to the individual or group, however,

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“there will be a degree of commonality in meanings among people who interact with a setting as a recreationist” (Stedman, 2008, p. 66). Place meanings can be perceived as positive, negative or ambivalent (Manzo, 2005) they can enable and they may enable or constrain the actions of recreationists (Sack, 1993).

Meanings evolve through recreation (e.g., Kruger, 2006), sport (e.g., Bale & Vertinsky, 2004) and tourism pursuits (Crouch, 2000). Specifically, place meaning is developed through experience and interactions with spatial elements that can be perceived by the senses, and can create emotions, connections, and identities within geographical locations (Tuan, 1975). It is an individual's experiences with and within these places that establish place meanings (Davenport & Anderson, 2005; Manzo, 2005; Stewart, 2008). When people discuss their experiences, place meanings are communicated to others and the importance of the place is revealed (Wynveen et al., 2012).

Recently, Brehm, Eisenhauer, and Stedman (2013) stated that place meanings are related to environmental concerns because the respondents had a “perceived interconnection between themselves and nature... rooted in a contextual element of the specific place” (p. 533). Furthermore, Spartz and Shaw (2011) identified urban natural area meanings of sanctuary, society, activity, and nature. These themes were interrelated and demonstrated the “positive and negative associations” (p. 347) of the place's physical, social, and cognitive elements. Similarly, Davenport and Anderson (2005) reported that a “holistic and integrative Web of River Meanings emerged from the analysis” (p. 625) for a diverse sample of recreationists in the Niobrara River. Place meanings were associated with social connections, resource productivity, the restorative nature of the activity and the natural setting. Wynveen, Kyle, and Sutton (2010) identified 10 place meanings of recreationists in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park that highlighted utility, natural assets, restorative effects, and social-cultural interactions. Davenport, Baker, Leahy, and Anderson (2010) explained that place meanings vary between groups and found that local park visitors identified with community and emotional connections through parks and recreation. Previous research demonstrates that place meanings are social, nature based, activity dependent, and inter-related. However, research surrounding adventure and extreme sports has not fully explored place meaning perspectives.

2.2. Rock climbing

Rock climbing's connection to its setting makes it a relevant activity for consideration of the concepts of place and place attachment associated with adventure activity places. Climbers interact with the rock face (e.g., cliff) and the surrounding environment to create experiences and these experiences influence perceptions of the culture, the climber, the climb, and the environment (Rossiter, 2007).

Rock climbing can be separated into four distinct types (traditional climbing, sport climbing, aid climbing, and bouldering) based on different behaviors and techniques (Graydon & Hanson, 1997; Steele, 2006). However, climbers often participate in multiple types of climbing (Levey, 2010) as different sensations and experiences are obtained through each (Levey, 2010). The type of climbing is also dictated by climbing site features (Graydon & Hanson, 1997). Traditional climbing involves a rock climber placing removable protection (e.g., cams and nuts) into natural features (e.g., a crack in the rock) in the rock cliff (Grijalva, Berrens, Bohara, & Shaw, 2002; Steele, 2006). Sport climbing “relies on gear that is fixed to the rock” (Schuster, Thompson, & Hammit, 2001, p. 405) which protects the climbers when they fall (Steele, 2006). Bouldering is an activity consisting of short problems/routes on large boulders (Burg, 2005; Grijalva et al., 2002; Steele, 2006). Finally, top-roping requires the climbing rope to be anchored at the top of

the cliff with the climber and belayer connected at opposite ends (Graydon & Hanson, 1997).

Despite all of these variations of climbing, the question remains as to: “What meanings are ascribed to outdoor climbing sites?” In this study, rock climbing is inclusive of all the types listed above in that it refers to climbing natural rock surfaces that have been prepared for rock climbing. The place meanings associated with artificial climbing surfaces are not considered in this study.

3. Methodology

This research was conducted as part of a larger interpretive study into the place meanings of rock climbers who utilized outdoor climbing sites and indoor climbing facilities. Kruger and Jakes (2003) and Wynveen et al. (2012) argued that interpretive methods are appropriate for inquiries about place meanings. This position is based on the understanding that interpretive research seeks to understand meanings created, communicated, interpreted, and modified by people (Gephart, 2004; Williams, 2000) through their interactions, interpretations and meanings of the world and its components (Angen, 2000; Tribe, 2004).

Furthermore, an interpretive inquiry can be used to uncover and clarify peoples' explanations and perspectives (Holt, Tamminen, Tink, & Black, 2009; Lin, 1998). Meanings vary between individuals and groups, so the interpretive researcher “seek[s] to describe and understand members' meanings and the implications that divergent meanings hold for social interaction” (Gephart, 2004, p. 457). This interpretive inquiry permitted the interviewees to articulate climbing narratives that the researcher was able to use to gain “an in-depth and integrative understanding” (Davenport & Anderson, 2005, p. 639) of place meanings from a select group of rock climbers.

The researcher is a component of the interpretive research process (Angen, 2000), and therefore, a brief background of the researcher is relevant. At the time of the research, I was an occasional indoor climber with some connection to the local climbing community. Earlier in my career, I was an avid indoor and outdoor recreational climber. My background assisted the research process by providing me with a base of informed knowledge of climbing terminology and climbing sites.

3.1. Research methods

3.1.1. Participants

Participants were contacted through a snowball sampling process which started with contacts within the climbing community and posters displayed at indoor climbing facilities and activity focused retailers in Western Canada. Participants resided in Alberta and British Columbia. To be included in the study, individuals were required to be over the age of 18 and actively participate in rock climbing. Twenty-one individuals (10 males and 11 females) participated in the one-on-one interviews. Male rock climbers ranged in age from 18 to 36 years with 1.5–23 years of rock climbing experience. Female climbers were 21–35 years old and had 1–12 years of rock climbing experience.

3.1.2. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share their thoughts, experiences, and ideas through narratives and personal accounts. Interviews stopped when no new ideas and perspectives emerged during the interviews (Patton, 2002). Also, the 21st participant marked a point when the pool of willing participants was depleted. Twenty-one participants were appropriate since qualitative research typically includes sample sizes of 15 ± 10 (Kvale, 2007). Interviews were digitally recorded and occurred

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