



For the love of the land: How emotions motivate volunteerism in ecological restoration

Cara Marie DiEnno^{a,*}, Jessica Leigh Thompson^{b,1}

^a Center for Community Engagement & Service Learning, University of Denver, Denver, CO 80208, USA

^b Human Dimensions of Natural Resources Department, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523-1480, USA

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ABSTRACT

This article describes, analyzes and synthesizes the emotions expressed by volunteers in a community-based ecological restoration effort in the western United States. We present a qualitative case study, the Partners for Native Plants (PNP) project, with the hopes of better understanding what emotions, flanked by values, motivations and goals, lead to involvement in environmental initiatives. Emotions play a dual role as both the outcome of event appraisal, examining whether one has achieved or not achieved a desired state, and also to function as motivators to work toward goal achievement. We examined two broad categories of emotions expressed by PNP participants. We examined those expressed in response to or as a motivation for the achievement of desired nature-based goals (pleasure-related) as well as emotions that are expressed in response to avoiding an undesired outcome or as a motivation to avoid goal impairment (responsibility-related), namely environmental degradation. Behaviors to protect nature are not based solely on cognitive decisions, but are motivated by a wide variety of emotions including self-blame, indignation, and affinity to nature. This information may be useful in understanding how to appeal to emotions and engage urban people as volunteers in hands-on environmental restoration.

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1. Introduction

As environmental degradation increases, there is a continued need for community-led ecological restoration efforts. Pawlik (1991) has pointed out that human activity and behavior change is required to reduce the ecological problems endangering natural systems. The need for community involvement is particularly salient in densely populated urban areas. The urban environment is especially important for discussions of environmentalism and conservation because the number and proportion of urban residents continues to rise. Understanding the connection urbanites form with nature in the city is important for several reasons. First, the fate of the natural world may increasingly lie in the hands of urban residents due to their concentration of the world's population and thus influence on decision-making and policy. Because those who have direct experiences with nature are more likely to support conservation goals, urban citizens should not be left out of

conservation's focus (Dunn et al., 2006). Second, the city can support the ecological function and biodiversity of nature, which benefits both humans and nature. Finally, research has confirmed that neglected urban environments have been linked to human disorders including a sense of social isolation, depression, and other health problems. A loss of community identity and lack of sense of place can also occur (Semenza et al., 2006).

"Community-based restoration is a powerful instrument to systematically address many of our destructive tendencies, and, in this exercise, to culturally transform society toward a saner, healthier relationship with the environment" (Leigh, 2005: 11). The formation of an emotional attachment to natural spaces in cities and the conservation and restoration of such places can provide a variety of benefits to urban residents including the restorative effects of interacting/viewing nature (Kaplan, 1995), the encouragement of exercise and walking (Nasar, 2008), enhanced neighborly and familial relations (Sullivan et al., 2004) and an overall association with general health (Maas et al., 2006). Though preserving natural areas in metropolitan locales may be difficult, aesthetic, ecological, health and social benefits can be realized. Surrounding development and high-use levels on adjacent land frequently affect natural ecosystem processes on city natural spaces. As a result, and to ensure benefits accrue to the community,

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 303 871 2158; fax: +1 303 871 3110.

E-mail addresses: cara.dienno@du.edu (C.M. DiEnno), Jes@warnerncr.colostate.edu (J.L. Thompson).

¹ Tel.: +1 970 491 2801; fax: +1 970 491 2255.

ecological restoration of urban natural spaces is often needed, but short-staffed organizations have little time and sparse resources to adequately tackle the issue. Such restoration projects are therefore often community run and volunteer-based. “The vast resources of volunteers can make an important difference in restoration work” (Ross, 1994: 57). The hands-on efforts of such stewardship groups make positive ecosystem contributions that may be more flexible, cost effective, and enduring than government efforts alone (Wahl, 2007). These efforts can maximize community participation by building on volunteers’ deep sense of connection and passion for the community and surrounding landscape. Building up emotional bonds toward nature can serve as a motivation to protect it (Fischerlechner, 1993). Emotional ties to local landscapes, such as urban open spaces and greenways, provide an opportunity to inspire volunteers to appreciate the ecological history, function, and delicacy of such spaces. As Leigh (2005: 8) states about ecological restoration,

It does something more than ‘passive’ environmental activities such as hiking, wildlife viewing, or environmental preservation, as it presents each participant with an environmental problem along with an active on-the-ground restoration solution, a solution for which each volunteer is a part, often with tangible results.

Meaningful contact with nature can occur in cities and influence one’s ecological stewardship (Kellert, 1996). To fully understand how people relate to the environment, we need know about the emotional, imaginative, and inspirational experiences that individuals have in nature in addition to their scientific beliefs and understandings. Without a closer look at how individuals develop a sense of stewardship in urban areas, we may be risking the environmental future of these communities. The process of becoming a steward, which includes heightened awareness, support, and finally active participation in environmental issues, is difficult to quantify (Selman, 2001), but likely to include emotionally charged values and attachments to place.

In this article we present and examine a case study, the Partners for Native Plants (PNP) project, with the hopes of better understanding the emotions, flanked by values, motivations, and goals, that influence an individuals’ motivation to become involved in collaborative environmental initiatives in their communities. Ultimately this information may be useful in understanding how to appeal to emotions and engage urban people in hands-on ecological restoration with the potential of influencing environmental conservation and stewardship behaviors more broadly.

Our objective is therefore to describe the specific emotions expressed by ecological restoration volunteers, who demonstrate their connection to local natural areas through their volunteer work. Much of the research focused on environment and emotions has either examined public participation in formal decision processes (see for example Vining and Tyler, 1999) or the psychological benefits that accrue to individuals from viewing or interacting with nature (see for example Kaplan, 1995). While there is an extensive body of literature regarding volunteer motivations, those examining ecological experiences represent a small fraction, many of which do not explicitly address emotions (see for example Bruyere and Rappe, 2007; Ryan et al., 2001). Kals et al. (1999) have stated “the power of emotion has already been reflected in one of the first environmental studies (Amelang et al., 1977), but is still very often overlooked today” (179). There is extensive literature that examines individual’s (rather than volunteers) reactions to and perceptions of ecological restoration (see for example Barro and Bopp, 1999; Barro and Dwyer, 2000; Davenport et al., 2010; Gobster and Barro, 2000; Purcell et al., 2007) but again studies explicitly examining emotional responses are limited. While there

are a few studies examining emotional or affective components related to ecological restoration (see Bright et al., 2002), these have focused on residents and not those actively engaged with conducting ecological work. Additionally, much of this work on both volunteer motivations and resident emotions has been quantitative in nature. Our study explicitly examines emotions as they relate to motivations to participate in an ecological restoration project and does so from a qualitative framework. By using a qualitative approach we hope to unearth the emotional nuances that may be overlooked by quantitative approaches. This study supplements existing work by focusing on a volunteer-based collaborative effort and qualitatively addresses the following research questions:

RQ 1: What emotions are expressed by participants who volunteer; are those emotions connected to their motivation to protect nature?

RQ 2: What themes of emotional connections and place attachments could be used to appeal to, and recruit a wider range of urban community volunteers?

2. Literature review

“The part of the brain that motivates us to action is the emotional part” (Coveny, 1993: 4). Emotion helps us interpret, summarize and organize information (Vining et al., 2000). Embedded within emotional response is a “readiness to change or maintain relationships with the world, oneself, or some object of thought (Frija, 2009). This action readiness is an antecedent to behavior and the result of the subjective interpretation or appraisal of an event or situation that elicits an emotion (Roseman and Smith, 2001). This cognitive process can occur consciously or unconsciously when an individual evaluates an event in the context of a goal important to him or her (Oatley and Jenkins, 1992). Motivation makes one work to obtain a desired goal and underlying such motivation is often a value, which Rohan (2000) describes as “a stable, meaning-producing, super-ordinate cognitive structure” (257). Manfredo (2008) further describes values, when used as a verb, to focus on “people’s assignment of meaning, goodness or worth” (142). “The attraction to valued things and places is felt as love or passion. When these values are threatened there are emotions of anger and fear, and when they are lost, there is grief” (Schroeder, 1996: 19). Values in this way are intimately tied to emotional responses, in other words when individuals make value judgments, they are appraising an event or situation in the context of what is held to be valuable. Experiences of support for or violations of values may then lead respectively to emotions such as happiness and joy or anger and disappointment. Individuals can be motivated through such emotions to either take action to achieve something desired or to avoid goal impairment (Higgins, 2009). Emotions can therefore be strong motivators, encouraging individuals to take action to approach or avoid a particular state as well as be elicited from the achievement of a desired goal or avoidance of goal impairment. Thus emotions play the dual role as both the product of achieving or not achieving a desired state and also to function as motivators themselves. “[Motivational and emotional parts of processing] are at the heart of which behavioural actions are selected, and how they are selected” (Rolls, 2005: 8).

Through this dual role of emotions to both precede and be elicited by goal achievement or avoidance of goal impairment, we examined two broad categories of emotions. First, we examined emotions that are expressed in response to or as a motivation for the achievement of desired states or goals for participants. Individuals with an emotional affinity toward nature, or love of nature, are motivated to connect to and have intimate contact with nature

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