

# Sense of Place

"Sense of place" offers resource managers a way to identify and respond to the emotional and spiritual bonds people form with certain spaces. We examine reasons for the increasing interest in the concept and offer four broad recommendations for applying sense of place to ecosystem management. By initiating a discussion about sense of place, managers can build a working relationship with the public that reflects the complex web of lifestyles, meanings, and social relations endemic to a place.

By Daniel R. Williams and  
Susan I. Stewart

## An Elusive Concept That Is Finding a Home in Ecosystem Management

One of the great and largely unmet challenges associated with ecosystem management is treating people as a rightful part of ecosystems. In many ecosystem models, despite occasional rhetoric to the contrary, there is still a tendency to treat people as autonomous individual agents outside the ecosystem, at best a source of values to be incorporated into decisions, at worst agents of catastrophic disturbance of an otherwise smoothly running system. Many scholars have made suggestions for bringing social concepts and variables into ecosystem models and assessments (Driver et al. 1996; Force and Machlis 1997). Far fewer have demonstrated how day-to-day land management might change when people are recognized as part of the ecosystem.

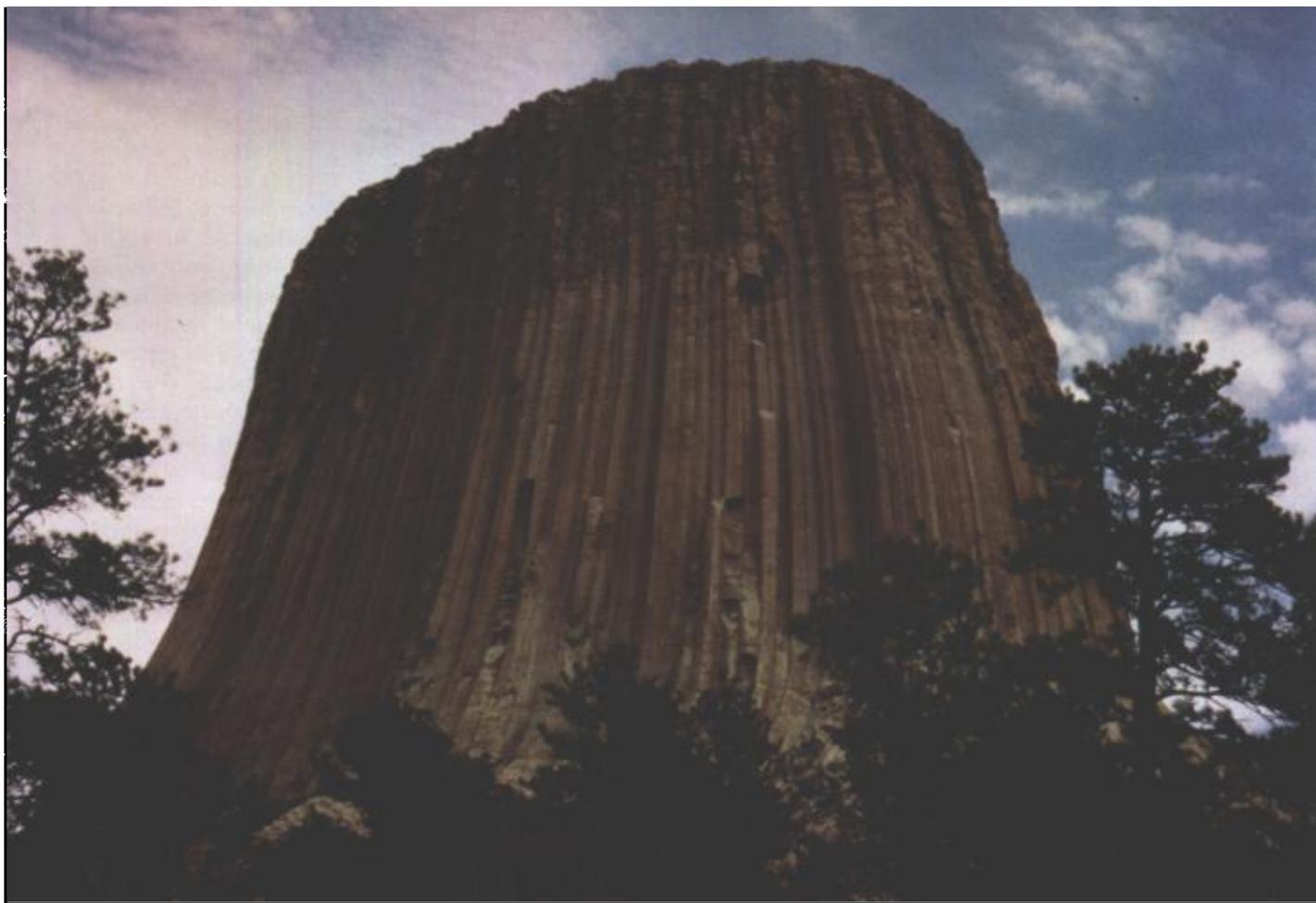
*Sense of place* is a concept with great potential for bridging the gap between the science of ecosystems and their management (Mitchell et al. 1993; Brandenburg and Carroll 1995; Schroeder 1996). But ironically, sense of place is sometimes seen as a barrier to sensible resource management. Managers who have heard the term used by people opposed to proposed changes wrongly conclude that sense of place is an argument for keeping them from doing their job. In fact, the concept offers managers a way to anticipate, identify, and respond to the bonds people form with places. By initiating a discussion about sense of place, managers can build a working

relationship with citizens that reflects the complex web of lifestyles, meanings, and social relations endemic to a place or resource. Sense of place can be the shared language that eases discussions of salient issues and problems and that affirms the principles underlying ecosystem management.

Though the term *sense of place* remains elusive, ill defined, and controversial as a resource management concept, it is turning up in a surprising number of academic discussions of ecosystem management (Grumbine 1992; Samson and Knopf 1996) as well as in recent ecosystem assessments (USDA 1996). Similarly, in popular media and a wide range of public policy issues, Spretnak (1997) sees a growing interest in sense of place and related concepts, like community, place attachments, symbolic meanings, and spiritual values. For her this suggests a resurgence of the reality of place that has long been denied, suppressed, and devalued by a mechanistic view of nature. At this point, with so many groups ready to join the sense-of-place parade, we think it is useful to ask three questions: What is meant by sense of place in its various forms and guises? Why is it increasingly in the hearts of citizens and on the minds of land managers? And finally, what does it suggest about managing ecosystems?

### Defining *Sense of Place*

There are many definitions and descriptions of sense of place. As a geo-



Daniel R. Williams

graphic term, place commonly refers to a center of meaning and felt value: "What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place when we endow it with value" (Tuan 1977, p. 6). A seemingly straightforward approach to defining sense of place is to think of it as the collection of meanings, beliefs, symbols, values, and feelings that individuals or groups associate with a particular locality. In some recent ecosystem assessments, this collection of meanings and feelings is reduced to a single attribute and viewed as just another one of many potential attitudes, values, and beliefs people might hold toward a resource (USDA 1996). The problem with these rudimentary definitions is they tend to diminish the holistic, emotive, social, and contextual quality of the idea, robbing it of the very richness that is its appeal.

*Place, place attachment, and sense of place* are used by various writers to describe similar but not identical concepts. Drawing from this diversity of thought (Tuan 1977; Hester 1985; Agnew and Duncan 1989; Shamai 1991; Altman and Low 1992; Groat 1995; Harvey 1996; Relph 1997), we suggest several overlapping approaches

or dimensions that capture the multifaceted nature and complexity of what we will refer to here as sense of place:

- the emotional bonds that people form with places (at various geographic scales) over time and with familiarity with those places;
- the strongly felt values, meanings, and symbols that are hard to identify or know (and hard to quantify), especially if one is an "outsider" or unfamiliar with the place;
- the valued qualities of a place that even an "insider" may not be consciously aware of until they are threatened or lost;
- the set of place meanings that are actively and continuously constructed and reconstructed within individual minds, shared cultures, and social practices; and
- the awareness of the cultural, historical, and spatial context within which meanings, values, and social interactions are formed.

Most people who interject sense-of-place concerns into natural resource issues probably have in mind something akin to one of the first three interpretations. Sense of place, for most people, refers to the rich and varied meanings

**At Devil's Tower National Monument, the National Park Service is caught between a rock and a holy place: the site is sacred to Native Americans and a destination of choice for rock climbers. The feelings associated with places have always been a part of our relationship with the natural world but at an intuitive level—as something many people understood but did not talk about or name. Awareness of sense of place has increased in proportion to globalization and our capacity to make and remake places virtually overnight.**

of places and emphasizes people's tendency to form strong emotional bonds with places. It is worth noting that although we emphasize the importance of recognizing "local" meanings, these should not be limited to residents' sense of place. Many tourists and regular visitors have strong attachments to places. It is not the possessors of meanings that are local, but the meanings themselves. Similarly, "insiders" are those who know what a place means to a group. Too often planners are "outside" the social circles that assign meaning to a place and therefore tend to discount them.

**Protecting a sense of place is the reason behind commonly accepted urban planning tools, such as zoning ordinances, regional tourism marketing authorities, and regulations on architectural styles.**

The last two dimensions, emphasizing the social processes that create and transform places, describe aspects often overlooked in natural resource management. They expand sense of place beyond its common conception as a hard-to-define attitude, value, or belief to include the social and historical *processes* by which place meanings are constructed, negotiated, and politically contested. Understood as something socially produced, sense of place becomes analogous to conceptions of ecosystems as dynamic and open-ended. That is, just as ecosystems are constituted by bioecological processes, so places are created and take on particular forms and meanings as a result

of social processes. Both ecosystems and places are dynamic, with a past, a present, and a future.

Sense of place is shaped by increasingly complex social, economic, and political processes. At a local level, place meanings are less stable than they once were, being buffeted by increasingly distant and uncontrollable social and economic forces. Meanings have become more individualized and boundaries have become more permeable. In addition, a sense of place that at one time may have been largely shaped and maintained by community insiders is now increasingly subject to more distant market and political forces.

For example, tourism, urban flight, retirement migration, and economic development increasingly challenge or contest traditional meanings of many communities. For long-time residents this often means that an identity based on agriculture, forestry, or ranching is being challenged by newer residents and outsiders' meanings and uses of surrounding natural landscapes. As they develop their own sense of place, the newcomers may become strongly attached to the natural landscape of an area without being socially and historically rooted in the place or community (McCool and Martin 1994).

Given the many dimensions of the concept, competing senses of a place

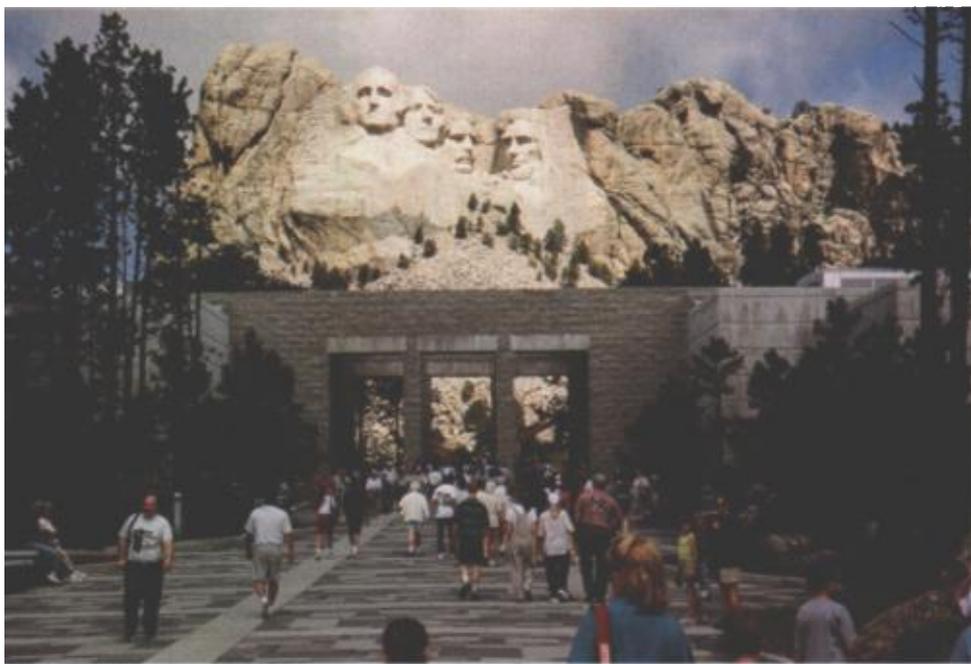
can be invoked by diverse and conflicting groups—local commodity interests seeking to maintain a way of life, environmentalists embracing Leopold's land ethic, Native Americans focusing on the spiritual or transcendent qualities inherent in a place, recreation and wilderness enthusiasts voicing concerns about new or nonconforming uses, and heritage preservationists trying to maintain landscape character or restore presettlement ecological conditions. Such sentiments are sometimes dismissed as the merely cosmetic or romantic concerns of designers, nature lovers, and heritage enthusiasts. Yet even what planners and scientists put forward as a data-driven description of a place in the form of a scientific assessment is itself another competing sense of that place.

Within forest planning debates those various sentiments—whether local or nonlocal in origin, new or long established—are all legitimate, real, and strongly felt and an important source of political conflict. Competing place meanings should not be dismissed because they do not conform to some expert's technical sense of place. Rather they must be acknowledged, if not embraced, for resource management to succeed.

**The Popularity of Place**

Why in an age of scientific management has such a seemingly nonscientific concept become a popular refrain in environmental disputes? Though the term sense of place has been widely used in geography and architecture since the early 1970s, the growing emphasis on ecosystem management seems to have amplified the interest in the concept. One reason for its present appeal is that it captures the rich variety of human relationships to resources, lands, landscapes, and ecosystems.

**Is Mount Rushmore a monument to American democracy and Manifest Destiny or a symbol of the colonization and oppression of indigenous peoples? In such strongly felt values, meanings, and symbols, we are discovering a way to express our sense of *this* place or *that* community in language we can all share and understand.**



Daniel F. Williams

tems that multiple-use utilitarianism and other earlier approaches to management failed to include. In essence, the shift to ecosystem management has brought a corresponding shift away from economic definitions of human-environment relationships toward more holistic perspectives often embodied in the term sense of place.

A sociological explanation for the appearance of sense of place can be found in globalization and the accelerating pace of change in society. The look and layout of most American communities have undergone rapid change in recent decades. Concern for sense of place has risen in proportion to the spread of mass culture and consumption through entertainment and retail goliaths like Toshiba, Time Warner, and Wal-Mart. Think about how Wal-Mart alone has rearranged the retail landscapes of America in the past 10 years. The social, technological, and economic forces of globalization have weakened local distinctiveness, many people say, and with cheaper transportation and new information technologies we experience more parts of the world through international trade, travel, and the media.

Ironically, those forces of homogenization have made place more important, not less (Harvey 1996; Mander and Goldsmith 1996). What were mostly taken-for-granted, subconscious meanings of a place come to the surface and seem threatened by nearly every proposed change to the local landscape. Efforts to introduce new land uses—whether theme parks, prisons, wildlife preserves, timber harvests, land exchanges, or shopping malls—become symbols of external threats to the local sense of place (Appleyard 1979). Such plans express the sense of place defined by an outsider—the scientist, government official, corporate developer, or special interest group—and thus represent the power of the outsider over the local.

Another reason for the interest in sense of place is the mechanistic view of nature that dominates our technological society (Spretnak 1997). Treating nature as a collection of products or commodities to be sold and isolating properties of the environment in

order to study them leave many people, lay and professional, with a sense that the larger whole, the place itself, has somehow been lost. This reaction was described in the Forest Service's own critique of the first round of forest planning (Larson et al. 1990). Though ecosystem management attempts to put silvicultural and forest management science into a broader spatial and historical context, it has not fully addressed the richness of human meanings and relationships to the land that people express and want to see represented in the planning process. Sense of place, in contrast, can encompass both natural and social history.

### **In Day-to-Day Management**

Our recommendations for applying sense of place in ecosystem management are not really new. Most can be characterized as common knowledge among experienced managers, especially those who are known as “good people-persons.” What is new is the unifying theme of sense of place—the idea that places have meaning to people. We believe that by putting the human bond with nature in the foreground, rather than treating it as an interesting but insignificant feature of the background for resource planning, managers can begin to give the relationship between people and the land the careful, systematic attention it requires and deserves.

1. *Know and use the variety of local place-names.* Virtually every place has a name, whether a roadside sign proclaims it or not. Naming things—Adam's task—is our way of organizing thoughts about the world around us, and anyone who knows an area and talks to others about it has a name for it. Arbitrarily changing a place-name can be as offensive as changing the appearance of the landscape. The name itself is a powerful link between people and place, symbolizing the history and meaning of the place. When a new owner or manager changes a place-name, the community may assume that many other changes will follow in its wake. Housing developers invoke a mix of apprehension and incredulity from local residents when overnight, places are renamed, often with exotic,

utopian names that have meaning only to the developer's marketing specialist.

Multiple names for single places—dating from earlier events or uses, or referring to a larger or smaller area—reflect the many meanings they have. Deciding which name is most appropriate in a given context requires some thought. Not every place-name is appropriate in every situation, as a Forest Service district ranger stationed in Alaska once learned.

The ranger went to the village of Kake, a Native Alaskan village on Kuprenof Island, to talk with villagers about a proposed action with implications for Saginaw Bay. Although the proposal was a modest one with little potential impact, the meeting turned into a long, hostile event. Near the end of the day, a village man approached the ranger and offered to tell him a story. The ranger declined, having spent the day bearing the brunt of much criticism and animosity from meeting participants. The man persisted, however, and told the ranger that no one had ever referred to their bay as Saginaw Bay until the gunship *Saginaw* anchored there in the late 1800s and shelled Kake, killing many people. Villagers, he said, call it Foul Dog Bay, a reference to the chum, or “foul dog,” salmon run. The ranger's repeated reference to Saginaw Bay had set villagers on edge and soured the meeting. Knowing and using common or traditional place-names in conjunction with formal names and legal descriptions, especially in communications with the public, signals that managers respect the ties people have to a place.

2. *Communicate management plans in locally recognized, place-specific terms.* Using local place-names has practical as well as symbolic value. The spatial units used for resource analysis and planning rarely follow social boundaries (e.g., counties, townships). Instead, biophysical characteristics guide definition of boundaries, resulting in plans that refer to management areas by number, rather than to places by name. The human-created features, the landscape, its social history, scenic beauty, community identity, family heritage, and spiritual values—all are

**When natural resource scientists and planners prepare a science-based assessment of a forest, their plan is itself a sense of that place—a sense no less valid than the meanings ascribed to the same forest by residents and tourists.**

stripped away to simplify biophysical analysis. At some point, managers need to put these human features back into their plans to make them recognizable, familiar, and real.

Computer mapping offers managers a new, powerful way to show plans in a place-specific format. With computers, maps can be constructed in layers, or sets of spatially specific information. Any combination of these layers can be displayed, including a layer that represents place meanings. Features such as special places, spiritual meanings, traditional gathering areas, and communities of interest have been mapped. Even the human-built and human-used features found on any road map help show the social context within which land management is occurring. There are certainly resource management areas where a map of human influence would be nearly blank; but that, too, tells us something about the land and the relationship people have with it. Maps are fundamentally social and human. If people are included in our consideration of how best to manage the land, their imprint on the land needs to be represented on maps.

An emphasis on place-specific thinking is perhaps most important when communicating with others about management plans (Dean 1994). Many people who care about the future of the forest do not feel comfortable treating the ecosystem as

an abstract set of resources with many potential uses. Instead, people tend to focus their concerns on the fate of specific places. The danger of thinking and planning in abstract terms is the possibility that these place-specific features will be overlooked. For example, when clearcutting is proposed and objections are raised, there is almost always reference to what the clearcut is next to, where it can be seen from, or why that particular stand is not like any other stand in the forest. All of these are social, place-specific characteristics that might not be evident from biophysical maps. For this reason, it is imperative that managers write plans and convey management ideas in terms of not only what could be done, but where.

3. *Understand the politics of places.* The adage “all politics is local” is another way of saying that what is personal, local, and immediate to people is what they care about, act on, and expect others to act on. The extent to which policies and actions are controversial varies from place to place. If a place is especially scenic or spiritually significant or was the site of an event that has deep meaning to the community, any proposed change or management action will be closely scrutinized. To know the politics of an issue, one must know the politics of the place.

In the environmentalism of the 1990s, there is a growing tendency for people to claim ownership of any issue that affects them, whether or not legislatures, corporations, courts, or government agencies would traditionally have given them power to influence outcomes (Williams and Methany 1995). The often-expressed sentiment “not in my backyard” simply reemphasizes the centrality of place in politics. The environmental justice movement is a prime example of the growing power of place meanings in American politics. Low-income and minority residents, tired of bearing a disproportionate share of pollution and other environmental costs, have succeeded in changing the government’s rules for siting a noxious facility (Harvey 1996). The changes effectively give the power to define their spaces back to residents. There has always

been citizen involvement in land and resource decisions, but the success of recent grassroots political action has given many individuals, especially those who speak as local residents concerned about their local community, new power and legitimacy.

4. *Pay close attention to places that have special but different meanings to different groups.* Local politics is never more complex than when more than one group claims to be representing local interests. People become attached to particular places for a variety of reasons, including scenic beauty, spiritual meaning, and personal or social history. People and groups can be attached to the same place but for different reasons. Overlapping meanings create special challenges, even for managers who are sensitive to place meanings.

The recent controversy over Devil’s Tower National Monument is a good example of a public site with incompatible meanings to different groups. There is no inherent conflict between the Native Americans who treasure promontories for their sacred significance in oral tradition and the rock climbers who love challenging climbing routes—until both groups find their values in the same place.

Such conflicts are not always centered on use versus symbolism. Mount Rushmore has rich symbolic meaning for both Native Americans, who see it as a symbol of colonization and oppression, and those who revere it as a shrine to the American experiment in constitutional democracy. Conflicts over place meanings highlight the futility of trying to formulate resource plans armed only with the utilization-maximizing principles of resource substitution and allocative efficiency.

The relative scarcity of natural places, and the feeling that they get more scarce every year, adds to the intensity of debates surrounding their management and use. Some of the same urgency seen in the quest to protect endangered species is manifested in debates over managing special, rare places. Both stem from a fear of irrevocable loss. In planning and management, rare places are sometimes informally flagged for special attention,

just as the Endangered Species Act requires identification and inventory of threatened and endangered species. A more formal effort to identify and monitor rare places, in particular those highly valued by several groups, would be useful.

### The Context of Resources

Sense of place and ecosystem management have much in common as responses to the historically dominant utilitarianism that has guided resource management since Pinchot's time. Both concepts recognize that society values natural resources in ways not easily or necessarily captured by the commodity and production metaphors of "use" and "yield." Both try to localize and contextualize knowledge. Both pay attention to history and geographic scale.

Recognizing the processes and meanings that constitute sense of place, however, adds a significant human role in making and using the landscape without reducing humans to one species among many. Negotiating a shared sense of place that incorporates both natural and social history allows managers opportunity to find common ground without pigeonholing people into utilitarian, environmentalist, or romantic preservationist positions. That is, it may be possible to build a level of consensus around sense of place because it readily leads to a discussion of desired future conditions of a resource in both ecological and human terms.

The term itself is neutral, though the venues in which it is used are often highly charged—evidence of the power of the ideas it expresses. Concerns about sense of place should signal to managers that the social costs associated with a proposed course of action may be high. What the manager can and should do in response may be limited by existing institutional structures or rules, but the sentiments and processes of sense of place cannot be avoided simply because existing planning tools and rules have tended to favor technical analyses. Societal interest in sense of place may, in the long run, inspire reforms of resource planning laws and procedures that better

support sense-of-place considerations.

Because sense of place is not the sole province of any one group, interest, or philosophy, it does not necessarily give those who dislike a proposed change new power to stop it (although the power of language cannot be denied). Environmental activists who advocate changing the appearance of a place to restore ecosystem health may do just as much to violate people's sense of place as the timber company that clearcuts a favorite vista. Nor is the concept always used to prevent change: historic restoration often involves making changes for the sake of enhancing or re-creating a sense of place.

Sense of place is not a new land use or a set of rights but a way of expressing a relationship between people and a place. The problem isn't to consider every individual's particular sense of place, but rather to recognize that in planning processes and management decisionmaking, the tools managers use to represent the qualities of a place often limit what is considered. But given natural resource managers' penchant for analytical tools and technical analyses, there is a danger in thinking of sense of place as simply another variable or resource descriptor to round out ecosystems assessments.

Understanding sense of place reminds us that natural resources exist in a social and political world. Virtually any resource or land-use planning effort is really a public exercise in describing, contesting, and negotiating competing senses of place and ultimately working out a shared future sense of place. That, in essence, is the central objective of natural resource planning, and it may be the only genuinely integrative approach to managing ecosystems.

### Literature Cited

- AGNEW, J.A., and J.S. DUNCAN. 1989. *The power of place: Bringing together geographical and sociological imaginations*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- ALTMAN, I., and S.M. LOW, eds. 1992. *Place attachment. Human behavior and environment: Advances in theory and research*, vol. 12. New York: Plenum Press.
- APPLEYARD, D. 1979. The environment as a social symbol: Within a theory of environmental action and perception. *American Planning Association Journal* 53:143-53.
- BRANDENBURG, A.M., and M.S. CARROLL. 1995. Your place, or mine: The effect of place creation on environmental values and landscape meanings. *Society*

*and Natural Resources* 8:381-98.

- DEAN, D.J. 1994. Computerized tools for participatory national forest planning. *Journal of Forestry* 92(2):37-40.
- DRIVER, B.L., C.J. MANNING, and G.L. PETERSON. 1996. Toward better integration of the social and biophysical components of ecosystems management. In *Natural resource management: The human dimension*, ed. A. Ewert, 109-27. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- FORCE, J.E., and G. MACHLIS. 1997. The human ecosystem part II: Social indicators in ecosystem management. *Society and Natural Resources* 10:347-67.
- GROAT, L., ed. 1995. *Giving places meaning: Readings in environmental psychology*. San Diego: Academic Press.
- GRUMBINE, R.E. 1992. *Ghost bears: Exploring the biodiversity crisis*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- HARVEY, D. 1996. *Justice, nature and the geography of difference*. London: Blackwell.
- HESTER, R. 1985. Subconscious landscapes of the heart. *Places* 2(3):10-22.
- LARSON, G., A. HOLDEN, D. KAPALDO, J. LEASURE, J. MASON, H. SALWASSER, S. YONTS-SHEPARD, and W.E. SHANDS. 1990. *Synthesis of the critique of land management planning*. Policy Analysis Staff Publication FS-453. Washington, DC: USDA Forest Service.
- MANDER, J., and E. GOLDSMITH, eds. 1996. *The case against the global economy: And for a turn toward the local*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- MCCOOL, S.F., and S.R. MARTIN. 1994. Community attachment and attitudes toward tourism development. *Journal of Travel Research* 22(3):29-34.
- MITCHELL, M.Y., J.E. FORCE, M.S. CARROLL, and W.J. MCLAUGHLIN. 1993. Forest places of the heart: Incorporating special places into public management. *Journal of Forestry* 91(4):32-37.
- RELPH, E. 1997. Sense of place. In *Ten geographic ideas that changed the world*, ed. S. Hanson, 205-26. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- SAMSON, F.B., and F. L. KNOPF. 1996. Putting "ecosystem" into natural resource management. *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation* July-August:288-92.
- SCHROEDER, H.W. 1996. Ecology of the heart: Understanding how people experience natural environments. In *Natural resource management: The human dimension*, ed. A. Ewert, 13-27. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- SHAMAI, S. 1991. Sense of place: An empirical measurement. *Geoforum* 22:347-58.
- SPRETNAK, C. 1997. *The resurgence of the real: Body, nature and place in a hypermodern world*. New York: Addison-Wesley.
- TUAN, Y.-F. 1977. *Space and place: The perspective of experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE (USDA). 1996. *Status of the Interior Columbia Basin: Summary of scientific findings*. General Technical Report 385. Portland, OR: USDA Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station.
- WILLIAMS, B.A., and A.R. METHANY. 1995. *Democracy, dialogue, and environmental disputes: The contested languages of social regulation*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

---

Daniel R. Williams (e-mail: d-will1@uiuc.edu) is associate professor, Department of Leisure Studies, University of Illinois, 1206 South Fourth Street, Champaign 61820; Susan I. Stewart is research social scientist, USDA Forest Service, North Central Forest Experiment Station, Evanston, Illinois.