

Expanding Places through Spaces of Engagement: Connecting Multiple Scales of Decision Making in the Context of Landscape Disturbance

Abstract/Chapter Draft for Place and Decision Making Book

Courtney Flint
Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
1102 S. Goodwin Avenue
Urbana, IL 61801
cflint@illinois.edu

Places are not static, bounded spots on the earth. As people live out their everyday lives, their interactions are continually creating and changing places. People-place interactions have been well documented in the literature, particularly how interactions within places shape local identities, social organization, natural resource decision making, and the meanings of places across landscapes (Cheng, Kruger and Daniels 2003; Brandenburg and Carroll 1995; Kemmis 1990; Stewart and Daniels 1998). This chapter extends these investigations of place to consider extra-local linkages across space and scale in shaping place-oriented decision making drawing on human geography and community sociology literatures.

Staheli (2003, p. 162) described place as the result of a “layering of activities that constantly make and remake it.” Drawing on Massey’s (1979) geologic metaphor, Staheli (2003) highlighted the role of human activity over time in constructing and constituting places. Yet place is more than a mere product of human action, it is also a dynamic process. In other words, places are always “becoming” (Pred 1984). This dynamic notion of place relies on an appreciation that decisions and actions at individual, household, neighborhood, community, regional, national, and global levels construct and shape the meanings and implications of places (Massey 1994).

Without a doubt, global and state scale processes and pressures certainly influence the position and character of places. But places, or more importantly the people and institutions within and among places, are not merely at the mercy of larger scale processes (Castree 2003). People take action to influence broader scales, particularly to deliberately shape the nature of their own place.

People acting in places are not simply marionettes whose actions and life chances are dictated by movements of the world economy and global politics. In other words, people acting in a place have a degree of ‘agency’ to control their destinies and those of the places they reside in. So local action cannot only *react to* global pressures but also *act back on them* (Castree 2003, p. 180).

This notion of reaching out beyond the confines of a particular place is central to understanding not only global dynamics, but regional experiences as well. Place-oriented actions and decisions often rely upon extra-local interactions which stretch spatial and organizational conceptions of place (Cox 1998). Thus, there are multiple scales at work in shaping the character and experience of place.

In the theoretical discussion that follows, the concepts of place, scale, community and regional fields, and governance help to orient a conceptual framework for understanding extra-local place-oriented action. An empirical exploration follows, highlighting an example of expanding the notion of place through regional interaction in the context of landscape disturbance in north central Colorado. The concluding discussion centers on rural and natural resource oriented places and decisions shaping landscapes and human-environment interactions.

Framing place

Noel Castree suggested that “Places are not what they used to be” (2003, p.165). In this statement, Castree refers to changes in how places have been conceptualized. Historically, considerable geographic attention was fixed on differentiating places from one another (Hartshorne 1939). Certainly, even today, few would deny that places are unique, different, and independent in many ways (Kirby 1989; Castree 2003). The politics, experiences, and human-environment relations in Vail, Colorado are hardly the same as those in Walden, Colorado. Likewise, neither of these places are the same as two, ten, or fifty years ago¹.

But despite an appreciation for uniqueness and differentiation, places are rarely conceptualized as isolated from one another. Indeed, appreciating the connections between places, and conceptually between place and broader scales, is essential to understanding the role of place in decision-making (Kirby 1989; Castree 2003; Cox 1998). The increasing interaction and interdependence of places across landscapes suggests that we need a more dynamic interpretation of place that captures the special contexts and everyday processes that shape life and interactions among people and their environments (Castree 2003; Staeheli 2003). As Castree (2003) suggested, people cannot put up barriers to the outside world and survive. Interconnections and linkages between places are critically important (Paasi 2004).

To suggest that people only operate or attach or identify with a narrow notion of place is a disempowering and oversimplified view of human activity and human-environment interactions. The concept of scale is a useful concept for expanding our appreciation of place to match the realities of identity and action for real people.

¹ This example follows from Kirby (1989) who suggested that “city politics in Houston could never be confused with city politics in San Francisco” (p. 323) and from Massey (1994) who focused on the changes in places and the conceptualization of place over time.

Scale as an organizing concept for connecting places

Places don't exist in isolation, they simultaneously operate within larger spheres of activity, or scales (Howitt 2003). Scales provide a useful way to organize connectivity from local to global. However, scale is as much of a “troubling and even chaotic concept” (Howitt 2003, p.138) as place (Staeheli 2003). Though often treated as neat, discrete, bounded units or levels or as separate, concentric rings or rungs of a ladder (Howitt 2003, p. 145), portrayals of scale as a rigid, hierarchical system may be problematic. In reality, connections between places and levels of society and the environment may involve more “awkward juxtapositions and jumps” (Howitt 2003, p. 145). In other words, interactions among multiple scales need not rely on notions of nestedness or contiguity in order for connections to occur. On a cautionary note, splitting up the world into discrete, separate parts or levels may overemphasize scale as an organizing framework and de-emphasize processes that are not scale-dependent or operate within scales (Brenner 2001; Marston 2000). The key to a useful conceptualization of scale is appreciating the fluidity of connections that exist between varying levels of engagement and interaction among people and between people and their environment (Brenner 2001).

Unfortunately, disciplines often specialize in analyses at different particular scales, making integration across scales more difficult (Agnew 1993). For example, political science typically focus on the role of the state, psychologists tend to focus on individuals, and sociologists frequently delineate their work in terms of households or communities. Thus, it is all the more important for interdisciplinary work to keenly seek to understand multi-scale linkages and eschew prioritizing one scale over all others (Swyngedouw 2003). Appreciating connectivity across scales not only reduces uncertainty about change, but helps build capacity for holistic problem-solving.

(T)he scale politics of power, identity and sustainability offers dispossessed, marginalized, and disadvantaged peoples a better framework for political action across and between multiple scales” (Howitt 2003, p. 139)

Cox (1998) outlined the useful concepts of spaces of dependence and spaces of engagement for understanding the interdependence and actions of places within a broader contest. Cox suggested that people have dominant areas of local interest or *spaces of dependence*. Activities within these spaces of dependence shape place-based identities and everyday life. Yet, operating within narrow spaces of dependence is insufficient for the maintenance and continual shaping of places. In everyday life, people logically connect with other places and other scales beyond their primary locality or place of residence. In order to maintain places and fulfill needs and desires, there is a need for engagement outside of narrowly conceptualized places – to larger *spaces of engagement* (Cox 1998).

“Local agents are participants in a much more spatially extensive set of exchange relations than those contained within the bounds of a particular place” (Cox 1998, p.4).

This broader engagement, or interaction across space, redefines places relative to others and the larger realm in which they are situated. It also stretches the notion of place as people develop affinity and meanings for broader spaces. By acting out on emerging regional or larger scale identities, new spaces or newly conceived places can become the focus of decision-making.

Place and community fields

Community as a concept is as contested as place (Luloff, Krannich, Theodori, Koons-Trentelman, and Williams 2004). While many definitions of community exist, a territorial or place-based component is commonly found (Wilkinson 1991). In an interactional interpretation of community (Wilkinson 1991; Flint and Luloff 2005), place plays an important, but incomplete role in the emergence of community. Community emerges through collective actions by people who share common interests and care about the place in which they live (Wilkinson 1991; Luloff and Bridger 2003; Flint and Luloff 2005). Therefore, though place and community are not synonymous, they are strongly linked.

Place-oriented community action influences the dynamic reproduction of landscapes, social organization, human and community development, and larger scale decisions. The concept of a community field is helpful to understanding how people from various social interests or fields come together in the general interests of a community to take action or influence decisions about their shared place (Wilkinson 1991; Theodori 2005). Yet we need not isolate this field process to the scale of locality or place. Indeed, communities often come together in the general interests of a larger region to influence decision making. I refer to this notion as a regional community field. There is room within a regional field concept for both generalized regional actions as well as place-oriented actions. In other words, people working together are likely to extend beyond the realms of their own spaces and places to engage others, both for broader regional interests as well as their own place-based orientations. This type of extra-local interaction is closely related to Cox’s (1998) notion of spaces of engagement. As the next section highlights, new possibilities and limitations exist for participation in decision-making by linking communities, places and scales for dynamic and purposive action.

Place-oriented governance in rural regions

The contemporary neo-liberal political context has involved a devolution of decision-making and a shift from the dominance of *government*, or the role of the state and directly elected officials (Painter and Goodwin 1995), to *governance* or

“Any strategy, tactic, process, procedure, or programme for controlling, regulating, shaping, mastering, or exercising authority over others in a nation, organization or locality” (Rose 1999, p15).

This shift in decision making processes has given responsibility to lower scales – in essence, to places. This devolutionary process involves the emergence of new players and new relationships to create capacities to act in common interests. As Rose (1999) suggested, “The pattern or structure that emerges as the result of the interactions of a range of political actors – of which the state is only one” (p.16).

Johnston (1991) highlighted political actions by those with power in society – people “who use space and create places in the pursuit of their goals” (p. 68). Though the emergence of new institutions and forums for decision making at different scales sounds at first glance as an opportunity for places to assert themselves in self-determination, in places lacking capacity, it can be a burden (Herbert 2005; Flint and Brennan 2006). Particularly in rural areas, new institutional arrangements may be slow to emerge and benefits may not emerge as readily (Jones & Little 2000). The question remains whether those without power in rural society or regions have a voice or indeed any ability to use space or create places that fit their identity and goals.

Rural, natural resource based communities often have a legacy of dependence, powerlessness, and being subject to decisions made at higher scales. Rural places have suffered from shifting national emphasis to urban issues and sources of capital in the post-fordist economy, not to mention the preoccupation with national and international security issues (Flint and Luloff 2005). On their own, individual rural communities may not have the capacity to create and shape places on their own, to use space to suit their collective needs and desires, much less to come together to sort out what those needs and desires might be or how to reconcile conflicting interests. But through interaction among places and by reaching out across landscapes and scales, they can interact with others via new opportunities in governance. Without meaningful dialogue and careful procedures, acceptance of divergent interests along with common ones, people and places may be powerless to influence decision making at larger scales. With interaction, however, local people may find the elements of place that are shared and worth fighting for, thus catalyzing potential for collective action and participation in the new forms of governance by operating within spaces of engagement (Cox 1998).

Forging new relationships amidst landscape disturbance in north central Colorado

In a five county region of north central Colorado², mountain pine beetles (*Dendroctonus ponderosae*) are causing massive tree mortality across over 1 million acres. The outbreak continues to spread and intensify within and beyond this area. A landscape disturbance of this magnitude challenges place meanings for those who live, work, and play in and

² Communities included in the study of this region are Breckenridge, Dillon, Frisco, Granby, Kremmling, Silverthorne, Steamboat Springs, Vail, and Walden. Counties are Eagle, Grand, Jackson, Routt, and Summit.

around forested areas. People interact with the changing forest environment in many ways at different levels or scales from personal property, neighborhoods, and communities to the broader regional landscape (Flint, McFarlane, and Müller in press). There are also important links between Colorado forest-oriented communities and state and federal policies as new opportunities for and restrictions on forest management contribute to influence land use and human-environment interactions. Discussions of global climate change as having implications for forest disturbance and management strategies also mean that places in Colorado also have links to global processes.

Particularly at more local scales of human-environment interaction, communities can be a key locus of decision making. The everyday interface between people and the forest environment occurs in localities and communities whereby experiences are shared by people with multiple interests. Decision-making in the context of forest disturbance is influenced or limited by larger scale structures such as state and federal regulations, but there is also a degree of autonomy for actions to emerge locally. Individuals make decisions about what to do with trees on their own property. Residents within homeowner associations and neighborhoods collaborate (or fail to collaborate) to regulate activities within delineated areas. City governments enact regulations and restrictions on forest management, influence risk management strategies such as local fire prevention and response, and shape policies regarding local development which impact wildland-urban interface zones. County commissioners facilitate dialogue across multiple local level interests and have jurisdiction over rural issues, including land use and forest management, outside of city limits. Locally-based representatives of state and federal land management agencies interact with local interests as they seek to manage public lands around the region. In this way, these agency representatives create a bridge between local interests and state and federal scales of decision-making.

While there are opportunities for local action to emerge in response to forest disturbance, capacity for interaction and collective action is not always present in neighborhoods, communities, and other local scales. Using the language of Cox (1998) the spaces of dependence around each local community are inadequate for dealing with the multi-scale implications of changing landscapes by forest disturbance. By linking actions among multiple communities and local interests across multiple places, considerable region-wide actions emerged in north central Colorado influencing state and national policies and decisions and re-shaping places, place meanings, and regional identities. Primary state and federal actors dealing with the forest disturbance and forest management issues include the US Forest Service, the US Bureau of Land Management, the US National Park Service, and the Colorado State Forest Service. One problem with the typical *government* structures for decision making in the area is the rapid turnover in local representatives of some of these agencies. When district rangers and field officers are replaced every couple of years, there is little institutional history or memory of interaction with local interests and communities.

Over the time-span of this recent mountain pine beetle outbreak, new *governance* relationships have been forged as local residents and representatives of different interest groups, communities, and organizations tapped into existing and emerging networks of

association, or new *spaces of engagement* to promote their place-oriented issues and influence decision making and action. A wide variety of new relationships developed across the five county area most heavily affected by the initial years of the current mountain pine beetle outbreak. The next section will outline examples from Colorado including regional lobbying efforts; task forces; interagency cooperatives with public outreach dimensions; cooperative forest treatment plans bridging industry, public land management agencies, homeowners associations, municipalities, and county governments; community and grassroots actions; and other efforts.

Discussion and Conclusions

Amidst major landscape change and forest disturbance, new relationships for governance emerged in north central Colorado. Non-state actors took over some natural resource management functions with new and different ties to state actors. A regional identity emerged with new forms of interaction mobilizing political action. These new forms of governance and interaction did not come without difficulties and tension. There remain disparities and disagreements over “haves” or wealthy communities such as Vail and Breckenridge and relative “have nots” such as areas of Grand and Jackson Counties. There are still areas of lower interactional capacity, or level of ability for people to work together collectively in the name of shared places and interests. In some cases, capacity is low because of strong government representation as seen in the case of Vail and many of the community engagement efforts dominated by officials. In other cases, conflicts of interest, tensions between newcomers and longtime residents, and poor economic conditions dominating everyday life, such as Jackson County, are perceived to block full engagement in assertive decision-making and collective action. Instability in agency representation at the local level continues to create problems with continuity, institutional memory and ability to facilitate collaborative processes.

But there is certainly evidence of progress across the region as outlined above. New forms of multi-scale engagement and connectivity among places are expanding place-based identities to broader regional scales. Where many north central Colorado residents previously hadn't thought they had much in common with their neighboring communities and counties, interactions on the bark beetle issues has allowed for a larger-scale identity to emerge. Places maintain their identity and meaning for residents, but they are more familiar with the opportunities made possible by extra-local and multi-scale interactions. As researchers, we do not always use the same definitions of place as the people we study (Staheli 2003). Thus, it is important to incorporate local knowledge and local meanings in our research on places, taking care not to impose our own interpretations of place onto those who live work and play in places, especially places at risk. For research outcomes to be locally relevant and oriented toward improving human and environmental well-being, we need to let local people articulate their own place meanings.

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