Place Representation as a Tool for Fixing the Yellowstone River

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Extended Abstract

What is most appealing about the concept of place is its accessibility as a fundamentally human experience. Place is the site of everyday living. All persons (all organisms) live in and are situated in a place. Place supports physical and social life. It is where each experiences life. It is the locus of everyday practices of home, work, leisure, collective action, socialization, and rest. Place is the standpoint from where we see others and ourselves (Proshansky et al. 1983). With such wide reaching implications for identity, community, and home sensibilities, it is no surprise that people ascribe tremendous value and meaning to the places they live (Fried 1963, Tuan 1977, Berdoulay 1989, Davenport & Anderson 2005). The ubiquity of place in humans' lives, the dependence upon home places and communities, and the love and defense of favorite places make discussing place a familiar topic to which anyone with a sense of place can contribute. The accessibility of place as locale for living and the meaningfulness imbued upon place make it an appropriate framework to appeal to rethinking ways of managing natural resource places in a different, more holistic, and meaningful way.

In spite of this familiarity, one of the difficulties of this project of 'fitting place to decision making' is in knowing precisely how to use this accessible concept to leverage better managerial practices for natural resources planning. Place becomes one of those well-understood misunderstood topics. Obvious questions arise. What aspects of place sensibilities are useful to managers? How can the wealth of meaning found in place be used to make better decisions? Difficult questions accompany the above. How can scholars promote place as a tool that will not be carelessly usurped and brandished as a weapon against publics, residents, democracy, wildlife, ecological functioning, etc.? How can place be made useful without losing its vitality, specificity, and richness? What is the utility of 'place' as a framework for management?

Because our existence depends upon natural places and because we need language to conceptualize, discuss, and manage these natural systems (Peterson 1997), then if place is to become a beneficial notion to stakeholders, managers, and natural systems within decision making practices, practitioners must address how managed places are represented within the language of planning as well as the consequences of that representation. We suggest that the manner in which place enters public discussion, as linguistic representations, is useful for the management of natural resources. We argue that the management of natural resources requires shrewd attention to the management of those symbolic resources in the public sphere because natural resources management and the management of place is a political enterprise (Cheng et al. 2005). This paper is a discussion of place representation or the rhetoric of place. First, we discuss the politics of place as the clash of vested and vetted socially-constructed representations of place. Next seeing place as a social construct within the public discourse, we turn to the literature on representation to discuss the power and possibilities of place representation. Then, we illustrate these powers and possibilities through a rhetorical deconstruction of two dominant place representations of the Yellowstone River in Montana and North Dakota (U.S.). Finally, we argue that because place is socially constructed, place can also be socially re-constructed in ways that can disrupt traditional partisan simplifications and stalemates in resource conflicts. These reconstructions of place offer managers another technique that allows for new ways of thinking of place, other possibilities for public

participation, and a new manner in which to reframe old relations between stakeholders, managers, and the places in which they are situated.

Place Representations and the Politics of Place

The representation of place is a cultural practice (Rose 1994). Because humans live in place and are social, they share their situated perspectives with others. Place becomes a social text continuously constructed and reconstructed within selves, communities, shared cultures, and social practice (Low & Altman 1992, Cantrill 2004). Expressing this sense of place, listening to others talk about place, and exchanging stories, messages, images, and depictions of place within the social realm socially constructs various representations of place (Greider & Garkovich 1994, Cosgrove 1998, Stokowski 2002, Carbaugh & Rudnick 2006, Kyle & Chick 2007). Place adopts active and prominent characterizations in the public discourse (language in action) and other circulated images. Place becomes fixed into a creation of the social world (Lefebvre 1991). Place as a socially-fixed representation serves as a tool for thought and action.

For groups of people to work together, a vocabulary is needed (Burke 1959). Resource planning requires *a vocabulary* that divides up the world into accepted terms and conceptual representations of space (Rydin & Myerson 1989, Guttenberg 1993, Whatmore & Boucher 1993, Myerson & Rydin 1994). To collectively explain and handle the complexities of human and natural systems, linguistic representation is necessary. Place representations name and bind the site conceptually in order for people to think and speak about place. Constructions of natural places have power because of their ability to bring a grand order upon the natural world and human world. Whether discussed in objective scientific terms or vernacular discourses of ballads, yarns, legends, or monuments, place representations take the form of clustered terms and phrases that have story-like qualities with mostly cogent logics, a structural and temporal order, and implied value (Stegner 1992). Place representations are kept alive through storytelling because they work people as a source of explanation, comprehension, thought, meaning, and beyond (Entrikin 1991, Smith 1999, Carbaugh & Rudnik 2006). Representations of place in public discourse make sense of complexity, unite disparate persons, appeal to collective memory, and give authority to subscribers.

Governing agencies create and use working representations of managed places rooted in various scientific trainings, available data, and cultures. The discourse of resource management has been one that relies upon technical knowledge to control and manipulate the natural environment within institutional, legal, and bureaucratic capacitates and frameworks. Place is often treated in objective terms by bureaucratic institutions (Entrikin 1991, Killingsworth & Palmer 1992, Herndl & Brown 1996). Yet trends in public participation in resource planning law and practice suggest that the subjective accounts of place are a valuable source for understanding participant sensibilities (Williams et al. 1992, Cantrill & Senecah 2001, Cheng et al. 2005, McCool et al. 2008). How ‘place’ enters the vocabularies of public planning discourses as a representational form is critical to the failure and success of managerial efforts (Norton 2005).

The representation of place has expressive, functional, and instrumental values, but it also has a rhetorical dimension. For “political power is not absent from knowledge,

it is woven together with it" (Foucault 1994:32). Representations are used to create identifications (and divisions) for social cohesion. They explain and convince audiences of their accuracy and legitimacy. Although they seem innocent because of their familiar uses, representations of place are involved in games of power (Berdoulay 1989, Tuan 1991, Rose 1994) serving as "a means of control" of behavior, interpretive frames, and decision making (Lefebvre 1991:26). Like street signs, representations of place are intended to guide, direct, command, and orchestrate behavior. Dominant images and pervasive discourse form representations of the material world that affect the practices in and the quality of natural spaces. Lefebvre (1991:42) contends that representations of place "intervene in" and "modify spatial textures" according to the "truth-teller's" interests.

In natural resources planning venues where access to resources and other economic gains are at stake of being lost or gained, established power relations among stakeholders and within resource communities become apparent within the planning discourse (Dryzek 1997). The management of natural resources is a political practice where established interests seek to preserve their stake (Kemmis 1990, Honadle 1999, Cheng et al. 2005). Representation of place becomes a site of struggle where the advancing of one place meaning is simultaneously a displacement of another. In the politics of place, controlling the dominant representations of place is a means of controlling the symbolic resources of decision making. Any legitimately accepted representative frame of a place within the public realm engenders a new way of thinking (Lackoff 2004).

Steering, promoting, mystifying, and re-emphasizing certain representations over others constitutes two kinds of power according to Latour (2004:102): the *power to take account* and *the power to put in order*. The power to take account dictates what 'facts' get counted as information (Luhmann 1989) and what gets excluded as ancillary. In pursuit of simplification or some other stated aim, aspects of the resource conversation may become screened out of the discussion by framing some information as 'already established', 'common sense', 'the nature of things', or 'indisputable premises' (Latour 2004). This can silence others' contributions or new information within the debate. The power to put in order assigns a rank order of relative importance to existing positions in the planning discussion. It establishes not questions of fact but of value. New ways of thinking, voices, or concerns in resource conflicts must be fitted into the existing order. New contributions thus occupy a relative position of value within the established order. The powers behind place representation lead to a clash of interested representative frames that *do work* for interested groups. The battleground is in public conversation where each seeks to reframe the place to create specific ways of thinking about access rights, quality and quantity of the resource, management authority, and what is considered legitimate.

Representations of place happen in subtle ways. Place representations are arenas of meaning that evolve with time, events, knowledges, terminologies, and cultural changes. That power is involved is not to suggest that all constructions of place contain nefarious players. However, the way that social constructs of place explain complexity, evoke local identifications, frame thought, direct behavioral norms, and earn legitimacy are important considerations when planning and managing natural resource places.

To illustrate the role of place representation in the politics of place, the power it wields, and the possibilities for using place representations for better management we examine the rhetoric of two popular representations of the Yellowstone River using data from the Yellowstone River Cultural Inventory (YRCI).

The Yellowstone River Cultural Inventory

As the socio-cultural part of a larger interdisciplinary riparian-corridor study sponsored by the U.S. Corps of Engineers (Corps) and the Greater Yellowstone River Conservation District Council (Council), we conducted 313 in-depth open-ended interviews with riverfront residentialists, recreationalists, agriculturalists, Native Americans, and civic managers along the entire length of the river (Table 1). In five weeks of fieldwork, we visited the homes of participants and spoke with them about their perceptions of their home place, the river ecology, river activities, uses, and conflicts (Gilbertz et al. 2006). All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, thematically clustered, and sorted into a report available online. We collected an inventory of these representations of this shared natural resource that would position managers to make decisions that account for river-front residents' symbolic and material values. There were three primary objectives.

1. The first goal was to document how the people of the Yellowstone River describe the physical character of the river and how they think the physical processes, such as floods and erosion, should be managed. Within this goal, efforts were made to document participants' views regarding the many different bank stabilization techniques employed by landowners.
2. The second goal was to document the degree to which the riparian zone of the river is recognized and valued by the participants.
3. The third goal was to document concerns regarding the management of the river's resources. Special attention was given to the ways in which residents from diverse geographical settings and diverse interest groups view river management and uses.

We assessed the validity of the analysis by communicating initial findings through over 30 regional public presentations, invited talks, presentations to the Greater Yellowstone River Conservation District, and a 90-minute National Public Radio call-in show on Yellowstone Public Radio with a webcast. We informed our participants of the radio show, regional presentations, and the final report's availability online and in hardcopy form by follow-up postcards.

The Yellowstone River

From above, the Yellowstone River looks unlike any other river of its size in the U.S. From its headwaters in Wyoming above Yellowstone National Park through Montana's agricultural heartland past Billings, the largest city in the Montana, to the confluence with the Missouri River twenty miles in North Dakota the river bends and braids 670 miles. Besides being managed as the western-most headwaters of the Mississippi River, the Yellowstone River is unique because it is the longest undammed river in the United States. Its wild origins of melt water that continuously carve the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone and its scenic falls below the high alpine Yellowstone Lake make it a centerpiece for the world's first national park. The scenic amenities, the wild

unimpeded whitewater, and the unstocked blue-ribbon native trout fishery make it attractive to a growing number of anglers and vacationers who visit and build homes along its banks in its western-most reaches. In addition to its contribution towards human and wildlife habit at, the river waters are spread throughout its valley lands providing productive ground for row crops, cattle, aquifer recharge, and an overall cooling of this otherwise arid valley.

Because the river has no structural dams that impound its waters, it floods every June after the snow melts in the mountains of its tributaries. The periodic floods, locally called the "June rise," make this river system highly mobile cutting new courses and shifting away from previous channels. Because private lands constitute roughly 84% of its banks, riverfront agricultural and residential properties are often at risk of flooding and losing land to the erosion of the river banks. In the summers of 1996 and 1997, there were two back to back 100-year floods which caused many private landowners to apply for bank stabilization permits from the Corps to mitigate the erosion. The number of stabilized banks has affected the morphology of the river cutting deeper channels and flooding new areas that previously did not flood. Many recreationalists argue that the bank stabilization projects consisting of weirs and rip-rap (large boulders, rock piles, or vegetative debris placed along the bank to prevent erosion) have negatively impacted the trout fishery, cottonwood tree regeneration, and riparian vegetation. For these reasons, the riverfront development pressures, and its unique characteristics, the National Geographic hailed it as "America's last best river" (Chapple 1997).

Two dominant representations of the river that clash among riverfront residents, agriculturalists, recreationalists, Native Americans, and civic leaders are: the Yellowstone River as "a productive place" and as "a wild and free-flowing river." These interpretative frames are used to make sense of management and user conflicts within the politics of this place. In the following section, we outline these representations of the Yellowstone River as they explain the setting for the actions of agents who live along the river as well as the river system itself.

The Yellowstone River as "A Productive Place"

Many participants with agricultural affiliations represent the Yellowstone River as a "productive" place. The land bordering the river is viewed and valued for its productivity. The water of the Yellowstone River is and has been essential to the agricultural productivity of these lands. The valley's fertility comes from the nutrient-rich spring creek tributaries as well as eons of flooding and receding that has distributed minerals and organic matter. Combined with the river's water as a source of irrigation water, the valley contains the most productive agricultural commodity grounds in Montana. The productivity representation is a source of identification among riverfront agriculturalists. They love the rural lifestyle, the river, and Montana. They are neighbor-oriented and respectful of others' private property rights.

This identification is amplified by the hardships they share farming an arid landscape with many financial and cultural changes in the continuity of their communities. Adherents to the productive ground construction told us that their way of life is getting more difficult to sustain due to threats of development, rising property taxes, falling or stable commodity prices, increasing cost of equipment and fuel, the

requirement of more acreage, the disinterest by the younger generations, water conservation regulations, new laws, possible water rights re-allocations, and the rise of the recreational tourism industry and its management effects. With more people moving to the valley for leisure, retirement, and recreational amenities, the agricultural production is affected by an influx of new cars on the rural roads, new homes, new taxes, new political orientations, new trespassers littering and leaving gates open, and new problems. All riverfront landowners share one common neighbor: the State, its water, its wildlife, and its various publics. Farmers and ranchers are skeptical of the management choices of this wealthy and powerful neighbor. The state's lack of management of its river causes problems that threaten the productivity of the land. Such problems of exotic invasive weeds, annoyances related to recreational anglers and floaters made possible by Montana's river access laws, and the erosion caused by high water as a result of difficult permit processes for bank stabilization are all examples of how the state is a bad neighbor that threatens productivity. The actions of outside others are framed within this productivity representation…

The Yellowstone River as a "Wild and Free-Flowing River"

"Free-flowing river" is a value-laden image that contrasts with the perspective of seeing rivers as solely for the purposes of human use at all costs. It is a direct hailing of a history of hard-fought iconic battles between environmental groups and dams (Hetch Hetchy, TVA Telico dam, Dinosaur National Monument, Grand Canyon Dam proposal, Glen Canyon Dam, others). Specifically for the Yellowstone River, the fact that there is no dam on the river is a victory over the federal government's proposed Allan Spur Dam of the 1970s that was to support water security and damage a unique trout fishery.

As one powerful participant told us, after advocates heard about the proposal they re-presented the Yellowstone River (MT) as a "fly-fishing destination" and an ideal location for riverfront vacation homes to resist a proposed dam. The expressed intention from interviewed participants was to fill the river valley with expensive vacation homes so as to discourage the Bureau of Reclamation from siting the dam via skewing the federal government's cost-benefit-analysis calculations when they considered the necessary regulatory takings. The plan worked. However, as the original advocates now admit, the discourse worked too well and the continued proliferation of homes along the river are damaging the ecological amenities that advocates sought to protect.

Many identify with the free-flowing river for the challenges, risks, and opportunities it creates for play. Many are see their riverfront property as more prestigious because of its unique status as undammed. An untamed 'Old West' like the Yellowstone River William Clark floated to meet Meriwether Lewis in 1806…..

Discussion

Each representation makes sense of historical conditions and events, addresses resource access rights, and renders complex conflicting relations simple. As is often the case in complex human-ecological relations, the situation is neatly boiled down into rote and simplistic reductions to partisan explanations often reinforcing divisive narratives of 'in' and 'out' groups (van den Belt 2004). The saliency of these two representations and the habitual way that adherents of each comfortably slide into each identity camp

obscures the inherent points of commonality. The impact of these polemical interpretative frames further complicates the problem by stalling discussion often resulting in negative consequences for the natural places as well as the overall quality of life for residents. Yet these storied constructions of natural and social places have appeal because it appeases, reconciles, and unites one story against the other.

How place representations enter public discourse is an important refocus onto the influence of discursive constructions rather than the influence of the constructors of such representations. Where people are unpredictably invested and sensitive agents, discourse is better suited for reframing and critique.

The purpose of this paper is not merely to deconstruct the representations of place. Instead we are using the above rhetorical analysis to begin to leverage the invention a new way of seeing for managers and stakeholders (Ivie 2001). Because place is socially constructed, place can socially re-constructed in a way that disbands the local partisanism in resource conflicts. In the next development of this paper, we ask how the representation of "productivity" can be expanded to include notions valuable to recreational and aesthetic interests. In what ways, does the "free-flowing" characterization share in features of the productive representations' identity? In what ways could both representations be enlarged to acknowledge the ecology of the riparian area within their constructions of the river? Finally, how can managers use existing representations to invent amicable constructions that bridge dominant existing representations of resource places and promote new ways of seeing place?...

Table 1. Summary of Yellowstone River Cultural Inventory Participants by Geographic Segment

	GEO SEG I: Missouri River to Powder River	**GEO SEG II: Powder River to Big Horn River**	**GEO SEG III: Big Horn River to Laurel**	**GEO SEG IV: Laurel to Springdale**	**GEO SEG V: Springdale to Gardiner**	**TOTAL IN GROUP**
AGRICULTURAL	**22**	**22**	**16**	**12**	**14**	**86**
CIVIC	**14**	**14**	**18**	**14**	**8**	**68**
RECREATIONAL	**15**	**16**	**16**	**13**	**16**	**76**
RESIDENTIAL	**15**	**11**	**16**	**15**	**19**	**76**
GEOGRAPHIC SEGMENT TOTAL	**66**	**63**	**66**	**54**	**57**	
NATIVE AMERICAN						**7**
PROJECT TOTAL						**313**

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