

“Our Public Lands, My Red Desert: Personal Experience and Public Place-Creation”

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Individuals sense and value particular locations on a personal level, yet the fate of public lands must be debated and decided in the public sphere. As officials seek a way to include ‘sense of place’ in their land management policies, they need to find a way to integrate personal experience with the more readily-gauged dimensions of ‘place’ – material characteristics, sociocultural meanings, and social and political processes. This requires close examination of the processes contributing to ‘place-creation,’ recognizing personal sensation as a basis for public expression, debate, and decision-making (see Figure 1, adapted from Cheng et al. 2003).

Using perceptions of Wyoming’s Red Desert as an example, this chapter seeks to unite seemingly disparate areas of geographic research: psychological / phenomenological studies of cognition and sociological / political studies of valuation. In doing so, it addresses the fundamental role individual experience and expression play in the generation of sociocultural meanings and political processes used to define and manage a place.

The RED DESERT

Citizens, interest groups, and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) representatives are currently engaged in an intense debate over the fate of the Red Desert, a seemingly desolate expanse that sprawls across south-central Wyoming. When BLM agents released a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) assessing the feasibility of oil and gas development on the public lands, individuals and non-profit organizations launched a campaign for designation of a National Conservation Area. The variety of approved uses, based on the myriad interpretations of the desert’s attributes, make for a rich case study of place-based land management.

Qualitative research methods, involving extensive review of professional documents and individual publications as well as open-ended interviews of interested officials and citizens, were used to explore dimensions of the Red Desert as a place (Bogdan and Bicklin 2002, Crotty 1998). The theme of ‘personal experience’ arose prominently from the collected data, threading through other elements and processes crucial to place-creation, including material characteristics, sociocultural meanings, and sociopolitical processes.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE and MATERIAL CHARACTERISTICS

‘Sense of place’ describes quite literally how people first experience space. Space has material characteristics – attributes defining ground and sky, biota and built elements. The most fundamental way by which people interact with the world is through engagement of organs to directly see, smell, touch, taste, or feel substantial dimensions. While some researchers “neglect the role of the physical environment, focusing on place meanings and attachment as products of shared behaviors and cultural processes” (Stedman 2003, p. 671), phenomenologists argue that a space’s material characteristics inform and influence all further experience (Davenport and

Anderson 2005, Brown and Toadvine 2003, Casey 1996, Bachelard 1994, Proshansky et al. 1983). “Places like the Red Desert are *real*” (Artist), and that reality grounds *sensation*.

Experience also takes place, again quite literally, on and to a more abstract plane – *perception*. As people mentally process their first-hand impressions, remembering their encounter with a golden eagle out in the remote corners, describing the vista from their front door, or “accumulating stories, out there on the range” (BCA, BLM Rw 2, paraphrased from Rancher, respectively), they layer memories and meanings on the landscape. Interpretation adds a human dimension – personalizing senses of place, – but simultaneously filters and even obfuscates impressions of a space’s material characteristics. This dynamic – an inverse relationship between subjective interpretation and objective attributes – is constantly at play during place-creation as well as experience.

Cognition – interpretation based on preconceived beliefs – engages a yet deeper dimension. People “construct,” “perceive,” “experience and interpret” place by “endow[ing undifferentiated space] with value” (Williams and Stewart 1998, Cheng et al. 2003, Davenport and Anderson 2005, Stedman 2003, Tuan 1977, p. 6., respectively). But values vary highly from person to person (see Rolston and Coufal 1991 for a list of ten basic landscape values, supplemented by Brown and Reed 2000 and Cheng et al. 2003); just as individuals see slightly different shades of red and describe rusty or ruddy or burnt soils using slightly different words, experience of the Red Desert depends on and generates different feels for concepts such as ‘wilderness,’ ‘aesthetics,’ and ‘economics.’ People expect and/or desire places to reinforce deeply-held personal values.

The process of individual experience does not progress linearly from “direct and intimate” physical interaction to “indirect and conceptual” mental interpretation (Tuan 1977), but rather flows and loops. A person who seeks to “experience the thrill and enchantment of hiking...without another person or sound but that of the wind” (Wyoming Wilderness Association 2006) will hike far out into the Adobe Town badlands and a person who seeks nothing but a route between Rawlins and Rock Springs will speed down the Interstate-80 corridor. Individual sensation, perception, and cognition all overlap and interweave to create personal experience.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE and SOCIOCULTURAL MEANINGS

Because public lands are owned and experienced by many individuals, their meanings and uses must also be defined and debated in a broader sociocultural realm. The ways by which shared perceptions of place can define social groups and perpetuate cultural beliefs have already been thoroughly explored (Davenport and Anderson 2005, Williams and Stewart 1998, Norton and Hannon 1997, Greider and Garkovich 1994), but the relationship between these elements and personal experience begs further consideration.

Sensation may appear to take place on a wholly unique, individual level, but shared descriptions and depictions of places allow for vicarious experience. Many people who have never been to the Red Desert are still able to form an idea of the place based on an article they read in a travel brochure or photograph they see on a website. Moreover, people who have only

baked across the scrubby Basin or been blinded by a snowstorm are able to broaden and deepen their sense of place by exchanging impressions. Few people have had the opportunity to explore every inch of the Red Desert in every season; second-hand sensation can provide a powerful foundation and/or supplement for place-creation.

Descriptions and depictions have limitations, however. Repeatedly, people acknowledged that the Red Desert's reality is "hard to define. Because it's big big expanses" (BLM Rw 2). Because they have no taste or texture or dimension – no material characteristics, – "you can have great photos, but you really don't get the same sense of space and grandeur and scale" (BCA). As a writer or photographer tries to convey their sensations of place in words or images, the lenses of language and camera only strengthen the filters of personal perception. The process of *expression*, by which individuals share their personal experiences with others, includes elements of deliberate selection; although people may not consciously decide what they feel or remember about a space, they intentionally choose both the subject and form of expression.

Expression is also a form of *participation*, involving expectations for interpersonal exchange. An individual chooses to share their experience believing that another will choose to receive it, linking them in a network of shared understanding. Casper Star-Tribune articles and Wyoming Public Radio segments and BLM EISs all expose audiences to the same words; Wyoming residents have been bombarded with messages about the Red Desert, thus provided with some common basis. But these expressions are never wholly objective – editors choose which articles to publish just as readily as environmental advocates choose what photographs to post and industry officials choose which figures to report. Moreover, individuals select what magazines they'll buy or websites they'll link to, in effect identifying themselves as members of a certain segment of society based on perceptions of place.

A desire for belonging, or place-based social identity, may be a force elsewhere (for further explanation, see Cheng et al. 2003, Kaltenborn and Williams 2002, Feld and Basso 1996), but in the Red Desert individuals focus on opportunities for solitary experiences – not group bonding – in remote regions where "you seldom encounter other people" (Sportsman). Instead, the message seems to be the impetus for participation in this case; "[attachment to] places can inspire people to take collective action" (Cheng et al. 2003, p. 93).

Societal groups such as Friends of the Red Desert (FRD) consist of individuals who have experienced the place independently, and want to continue to do so; participation in a place-based exchange is inspired and fueled by valuation and expectation. Stories, even those presented in first-person terms such as "When I first drove off the pavement into the Red Desert..." (Jones 2005) and "trudging across the Killpecker Dunes, I..." (Clifford 2002), are not simply presentations of perception, but expressions of cognition. Images of wild horses in the Jack Morrow Hills depict impressions of 'wilderness' and 'freedom,' for example, while representations of gas wells in Desolation Flats can convey ulterior messages of 'wealth' and/or 'desecration.' When people publish testaments or photographs depicting the Red Desert as either an empty wasteland just waiting for oil rigs or a pristine wilderness (Jones 2005, Clifford 2002), they are in fact drawing on personal cognition to negotiate personal and societal

interpretations of ‘open space’ and ‘desolation’ (Shepard 1991). In doing so, they engage in public debate over the management of places.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE and SOCIOPOLITICAL PROCESSES

Although land management debate ostensibly focuses on uses for specific locations – oil and gas development in a Desolation Flats Project Area or maximum protection of a proposed Adobe Town Wilderness Area, – it actually reflects the politicization of personal and societal values (see Cheng et al. 2003, Williams et al. 1992). People only protest alteration to the physical environment – construction of a power line, opening or closing of a road, overgrazing of a ranch – because those material characteristics are the basis for their individual experiences.

Recognizing the need to take these perceptions into account when debating policies, land managers encourage participation in political processes through standard NEPA procedures and even full collaborative efforts (Davenport and Anderson 2005, Cheng et al. 2003, Eisenhower et al. 2000, Kruger and Shannon 2000, Williams and Stewart 1998, Mitchell et al. 1993, Williams et al. 1992). BLM officials in Wyoming were shocked, however, by the reaction to DEISs for locations in the Red Desert: individuals submitted a record number of responses, the newspapers filled with articles and editorials, groups as seemingly uninterested as the Wyoming State AFL-CIO published formal opinions, and even the University of Wyoming developed an exhibit on senses of place in the Red Desert.

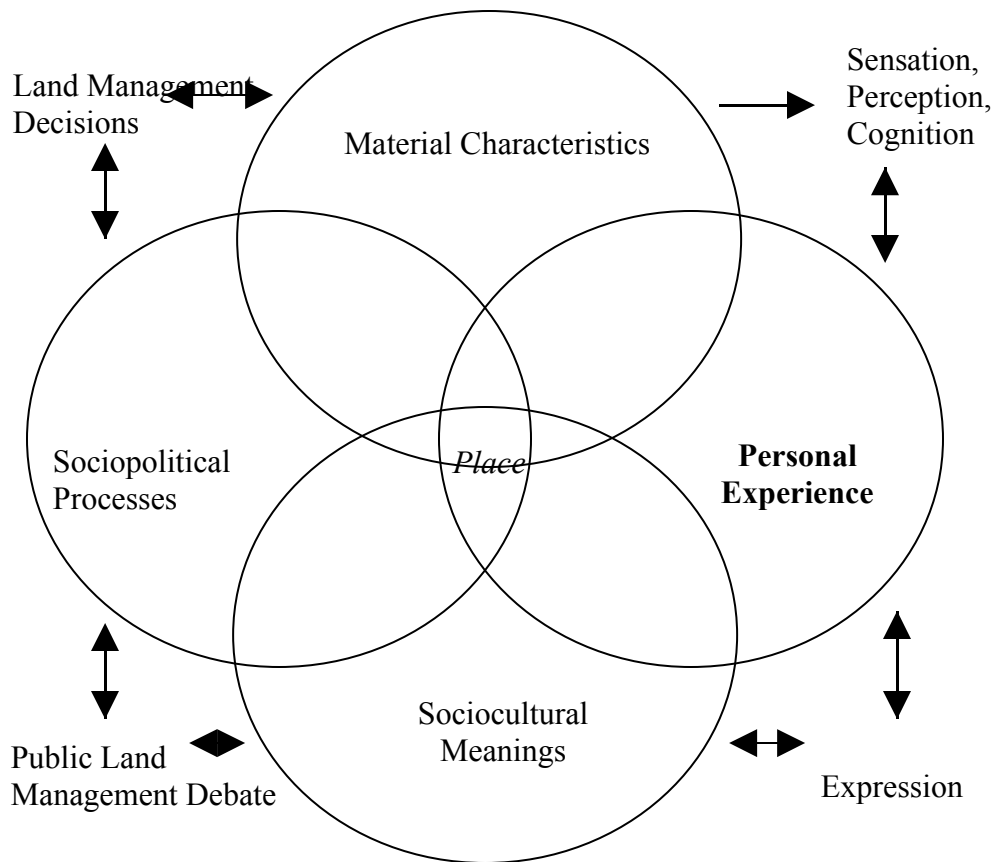
Indeed, ‘sense of place’ has become a key phrase in the political process. The environmental advocacy organization Biodiversity Conservation Alliance, for example, has been working to change public opinion of ‘desolate space’ into ‘meaningful place;’ in offering field trips to bring people to the Red Desert and, more widely, slide shows, photo displays, and numerous publications to bring the Red Desert to people, the group expects first- and second-hand sensation to encourage valuation and, ultimately, participation. Calling on individual perceptions, FRD has encouraged members to “[t]alk about personal experiences” (Website. 2006) with their governmental representatives, even providing templates for letters.

While “sense of place can be the shared language that eases discussions of salient issues and...affirms the principles underlying ecosystem management” (Williams and Stewart 1998, p. 18), it can also become impotent or misconstrued when divorced from personal experience. When land managers read official documents and host formal meetings, they aren’t gauging the breadth and depth of people’s unique relationships with the land; individual expressions are easily buried under layers of scientific, economic, even sociological statistics. When advocacy groups focus all attention on the propagation of formal positions, they lose the places behind the ideals; personal perceptions are stifled by bullet-lists and form letters. When people base their opinions solely on second-hand sources and/or couch their expressions in wholly value-laden terms, they ignore the entirety of experience. Tuan warned more than thirty years ago that “[w]e are in the habit of denying or forgetting the real nature of our experiences in favor of the cliché of public speech” (1977, p. 204), yet people continue to discount individuality. Before selecting and/or rallying behind a publicly-created sense of the Red Desert as a place – wilderness or homeland, oil and gas repository or ecosystem, -- individuals must continually (re)consider and (re)engage in the fundamentals of personal experience.

‘Places’ evolve into and with ‘spaces’ through sensation, perception, cognition, expression, public debate, and, looping back, management decisions. There are numerous ways to lose ‘touch.’ But if participants adhere to the spirit of political processes and remain open to the nuances of individual experience and expression, the passion people have for places can provide a level of honesty and dedication to public debate over the management of places, and remain truer to the land itself.

When one citizen changed reference to his personal experiences in “*My Red Desert*” to advocate management of “*Our Public Lands*” (Bell 2007, emphasis added), he demonstrated how personal relationships are currently disvalued in the process of place-creation. Officials and theorists, citizens and owners must explore options for recognizing “*My Red Desert*” as an important part of not “*Our Public Lands*,” but *Our Red Desert*.

FIGURE 1 : DIMENSIONS of PLACE and PROCESSES of PLACE-CREATION



Adapted from Cheng et al. 2003, Figure 1, p. 90, to include “Personal Experience” and procedural arrows depicting place-creating; also renaming “Material Characteristics” from “Biophysical Characteristics” and “Sociopolitical Processes” rather than “Social and Political Processes.”

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