

Place in action: A look at sense of place among Forest Service volunteers

Ben Amsden, Richard C. Stedman, Linda Kruger

Extended Abstract¹

Introduction and Framework

In order to connect the broadly-bounded concepts of sense of place and decision-making, we must focus on what people actually *do* in special places. Such an experiential, activity-based approach to the study of place will help us engage findings that describe not just how people *feel*, but also how and why they *act*: why they participate in local community institutions, how they interact with others, or what, if anything, they decide to do to pre(con)serve their local natural resources.

One example of this activity-based perspective that is closely aligned with this book's quest to fit place with decision-making is the study of volunteering as a form of public participation in natural resource management. Very little place research has addressed the meanings and attachment of volunteers, even though many of the causes and issues that lead people to volunteer are place-based (including restoration ecology that is explicitly about re-creating place). Furthermore, natural resource managers could compliment their strong understanding of the economic value of volunteers with additional insight into the perspectives and motivations of the volunteers. As such, a marriage of volunteering and place is appropriate for a number of reasons.

First, volunteering in a special place may create place meanings that are vastly different from those created through other activities. For example, volunteering plays a specific role in the creation of place-based identity (Gooch 2003). Identity creation, or in some cases identity maintenance, is in keeping with the social-psychological literature in wider volunteer contexts (Penner et al., 2005; Glynn, 2000; Piliavin & Callero 1991). Specifically, the creation of identity gives volunteers a sense of what they're doing and why (Glynn, 2000). This sense of self then informs how people view themselves in terms of the environment around them (Proshansky, 1978; Stedman et al., 2004). While boating, hiking, and hunting in a national forest may help a young person develop an identity as an "outdoorsperson," a weekend spent maintaining trail or serving as a summit steward in that same forest may lead to a more specific identity as a "helper" or "protector."

Second, volunteering is similar to sense of place in that it is situated in both *social* and *personal* contexts, oftentimes simultaneously. These contexts help people use important places to realize personal goals and strengthen social ties. Much of this depends on whether the volunteer is working alone, or in a group. When working alone, volunteers participate in activities that closely reflect their personal history and sense of self (Hustinx and Lammertin 2003). On the other hand, when volunteers are acting in a group context (such as a group of co-workers volunteering together one Saturday on the trail), they may focus more on the development of social ties and the organizational structure of the activities in which they engage (Wilson, 2000).

Third, volunteering has a strong leisure component. For example, volunteering which is more than just the provision of labor is known as serious leisure. Serious leisure

¹ **NOTE** : This abstract is slightly longer than the suggested length because of the inclusion of sample participant photographs

is distinguished from other types of leisure by the level of personal investment: the need to participate in a unique subculture, acquire special skills and knowledge in the context of career development, and strongly identify with the chosen pursuit (Stebbins, 1992). Unlike other forms of public participation, such as attendance at a public hearing or participation in community leadership, the goal of serious leisure is skill or career development, not necessarily power in decision making.

If experience is indeed an ingredient in the creation of a sense of place, then each of these examples suggest that the act of volunteering may be a 'new' experience for place research. This chapter engages this idea, by qualitatively describing the places, meanings, and experiences that drive sense of place among participants in a volunteer program organized by the U.S. Forest Service in southern Alaska. The specific research question to be addressed is: how do the settings and activities of a volunteer program contribute to the sense of place of its participants?

Setting and Methods

The setting for this research is the Russian River Campground in southern Alaska. At the campground, a volunteer-based education and restoration program known as "Streamwatch" was established to educate fishermen in the ways of resource-friendly fishing practices. By 2005 the program included 39 total volunteers, 10 of whom participated in this research. We used a technique called resident-employed photography, a process whereby researchers analyze photographic images taken by local residents to *show*, instead of just *tell*, specific details of the places that are important to them. Participants can also use their photographs to capture multiple details about each important place, and to remind them of what (or who) they are trying to capture. The resident-employed photography protocol replicated the approach of Stedman et al. (2004). In that project, participants were asked to take multiple photographs of several different places of importance in their lives. They were then interviewed, in order to capture the stories and perspectives behind each photo. The interviews were a critical part of the resident-employed photography process, because they allowed both researchers and participants to better understand not only the content of each photo, but also the mutual definitions of sociocultural and ecological phenomena.

The 10 Streamwatch volunteers were recruited for participation in the summer of 2005. Each participant was issued a single-use camera and asked to capture elements of their daily lives and their volunteer work that provide the most meaning, or that would be most missed if they were to move away. In addition, they were encouraged to photograph anything that represented why they volunteer, or demonstrated what they most would miss if they ceased volunteering. Once the cameras were collected from both the residents and the volunteers, we conducted follow-up interviews in order to review the photos and retrieve the personal story behind each one.

Results

The photographs and the text from the follow-up interviews were coded and jointly analyzed. From this analysis, four place-based themes emerged. Each theme connects place and activity, linking the important places in and around the Russian River site with the meanings and experiences that emerged from participating in the Streamwatch program. The four themes (including sample photographs) are as follows:

The Russian River: How it is “Supposed” to be. The Russian River as a setting for the Streamwatch program was very important to the volunteers as both an actual place and a cogent meaning. As a place, it represented a wide range of both past and present experiences, both volunteer-related and not. As a meaning, it symbolized the importance the volunteers placed on the immediate preservation of the natural resources of Alaska. To Martin, a retired Streamwatch volunteer from Anchorage, this preservation meant working to restore the landscape to the way it was before human impact. The following photo is of a little-used hiking trail leading into the wilderness:



The White Trail is actually detour trail from red trail to power line. It's a rainforest. Amazing. Makes you think about what it was like. So unique. I want to keep it as it is.

Martin's comments suggest that the trail was important to him because it represented how the landscape might have appeared in the past. By participating in Streamwatch, Martin could tap into this vision and contribute to the restoration of the natural area.

Campgrounds as Social spaces: Interacting with like-minded volunteers. The second important organizing feature of meanings and experiences within the Streamwatch program involves the importance of the friendships and relationships that are cultivated during the volunteer experience. Representing fun, solidarity, and purpose, the act of creating and maintaining friendships was revealed to be one of the highlights of volunteering in the Streamwatch program. In fact, nearly every participant who discussed relationships and friendships suggested that the seeing familiar people was one of the main reasons they returned to the Streamwatch program each year. Marissa, a volunteer in her mid forties, provided an example of the social aspect of volunteering by providing a photo of two other volunteers who were staying at a nearby campsite:

Tom and Elaine. They camp with us. We like the social aspect of meeting other volunteers. When we started, we already knew some folks, but have met more.

In addition to maintaining friendships, the “teamwork” that took place among the fellow Streamwatch volunteers was an important social meaning among many participants.

Recreation at the Russian River and in Cooper Landing. Several of the Streamwatch volunteers saw their efforts as a form of recreation. This was evidenced by the recurrence of images depicting the complimentary campsites provided to those Streamwatch workers who lived outside the local area:



This is our actual campsite and our motor home. We have a screen porch, and its private. Lots of room for enjoyment.

The theme of recreation involved activities both in and outside of the Russian River campground, and in many cases extended beyond the actual work of volunteering in the Streamwatch program.

The campground as a place to teach and give back. Another important meaning within the sense of place of the volunteers involved their ability to construct and maintain the role of “teacher.” One of the major requirements of the Streamwatch program was to educate fishermen in the ways of resource-friendly fishing practices, and help visitors avoid the attentions of the many large bears that populate the area. To this end, volunteers would patrol the boardwalk, observing behaviors, engaging in interpretation, answering questions, providing assistance, and offering advice. This opportunity to “be an expert” about the facilities, the agency, and the Streamwatch mission was of great importance to volunteers. In some cases, this was symbolized by the campground itself:



Program works to save river. Privileged to be part of it. Like people and educating.

In other cases, it was symbolized by volunteers in action. Megan, a middle-aged resident of the nearby town of Moose Pass, indicated the importance of teaching fishermen about bears. She suggested that while some fishermen were resistant to the information, most were responsive to the larger message.

Discussion

The findings revealed meanings that emerged jointly from the nature of the experience (participation in the Streamwatch program) and the site where these experiences occurred. First and foremost, the volunteers who participated in this research

see the act of volunteering in Streamwatch as a form of leisure, reflected by the numerous pictures of the campsite where they stayed and the repeated referrals to the “fun” of the program, the enjoyment of seeing wildlife, and the act of socializing with others. Second, the volunteers stayed with Streamwatch in order to give their time and skills back to a resource that they felt had given much to them. Finally, the volunteers saw the act of volunteering (both in Streamwatch and elsewhere) as a way to strengthen and maintain the landscapes they saw as “home.”

But why choose the Streamwatch program to have fun, socialize, and give back? First, the volunteer participants saw Streamwatch as a way to combine their love for the Russian River with their need for social connection, using the program as an outlet to search for new opportunities for social growth. This growth came about through the creation of new, teamwork based relationships with fellow volunteers, which helped the volunteers feel as though they were an important factor contributing to a greater, place-based good. Second, volunteering in the Streamwatch program also helped volunteers legitimate important identities as “teacher” or “protector” of a specific important place. In this case, the volunteers chose the Streamwatch program for the specific purpose of combining place with the act of identity creation.

It should also be noted that on the surface, the identity creation dialogue may make it appear as though the Streamwatch volunteers were engaging in serious leisure. However, during the interviews they did not mention volunteering as a proxy for a career, only that they enjoyed the opportunity to engage in the various volunteer activities. This suggests that the volunteers, at least in this context, may not be engaging in their volunteer work to the extent necessary to classify it as a form of serious leisure.

In summary, this experiential, action-focused approach to the study of sense of place is a useful for natural resource managers and decision-makers, because they can better reach out to the volunteers who are becoming more important to the future of important places such as national parks and forests. As budgets shrink and services decline, it makes sense to implement both place-based and activity-based approaches to understanding those who have donated time and energy..

Applications of this understanding could include a written handbook for volunteer recruitment, possibly instructing managers to use place descriptions to entice potential volunteers. It could include a training manual, with a section on skill development in line with the concept of serious leisure. Another potential product could be a manual of best practices aimed at the long-term retention of volunteers in a specific place based-context. Observing how these materials work will also help managers gain a basic understanding of how experiences, meanings, and relationships inform the cognition of volunteers. Elucidating the connections between activity and sense of place will also help the volunteers themselves better understand what they do, providing them with a means toward the realization of repeated, satisfying and fulfilling volunteer experiences.

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