There is a place called the Red Desert. The landscape there doesn’t look particularly red, but yawning expanses of dusty greasewood easily appear deserted. The “miles and miles of nothing but miles” add up to an overwhelming sense of space – featureless, limitless, meaningless space.

But the Red Desert is a place. Land and sky, sagebrush and antelope, fences and roads – it has material characteristics; it exists. I’ve seen it. You can see it too, just by driving across Wyoming on Interstate 80. Better yet, you can pause somewhere between Rawlins and Rock Springs to see, smell, hear, feel, literally sense the place. As your body takes in the stimuli, your mind will filter and favor certain sensations, creating personal perceptions and conceptions. You might focus on the uninterrupted vistas and react with pleasure, even identify with the seeming “wildness,” or you might dislike, even feel alienated by the “desolation” of the incessant winds; either way, you’ll take memories from and layer meaning upon the landscape, personally investing in the place.

If you don’t have time to actually experience the place first-hand, you can look at photographs and read descriptions. These depictions – presented through others’ lenses and pens -- enable you to learn about the Red Desert from different perspectives. Some of those who have shared their views in the public sphere may tell you that it’s the most beautiful place on earth –
want you to believe that it’s beautiful too – because they love it but they don’t own it. Legally, it’s not their personal desert; it’s our public desert, thus we have a say in how it is used.

An individual owner could manage the land according to his or her personal preferences for certain features, but because it is public land, the Rock Springs, Rawlins, and Lander offices of the BLM have the difficult duty of negotiating several perceptions of economic and sociocultural “value” (Davenport and Anderson 2005, Stedman 2003, Cheng et al. 2003, Brandenburg and Carrol 1995, Mitchell et al. 1993); policies and procedures that regulate “use” of the land – even “multiple use” – necessitate recognition of and preference for some physical, cultural, and aesthetic “resources” over others. This can easily lead to controversy.

When the Bureau of Land Management recently issued Draft Environmental Impact Statements that proposed expanding oil and gas development in parts of the Red Desert, agency officials were astounded by the volume and vehemence of the response; dozens of organizations and thousands of individual citizens contacted the agency to express deep concern for certain attributes as well as specific places. Words and images of “beauty” and “wildness” swirled through the public sphere, but personal pronouns grounded the debate. People wanted to share their own experiences and their own opinions with the agency – to give voice to their deeply-held and valued senses of the Red Desert.

Officials who make the final decisions regarding public land management have grown increasingly aware of the need to integrate peoples’ “senses of place” into their policies and procedures (Williams and Stewart 1998). What, though, is a “sense of place”? How is it created and how is it used? As researchers seek to understand the process of public place-creation, they often focus on the material characteristics of meaningless “space,” the sociocultural values layered on this space, and the political processes that regulate appropriate use (see, for example,
Cheng et al. 2003, Greider and Garkovich 1994, Eisenhauer et al. 2000, Tuan 1977). While these all comprise important dimensions of “place,” they discount personal elements of place-creation; phenomenological and psychological research explores the meaning and significance of individuals’ interaction with their environments (see, for example, Brown and Toadvine 2003, Stedman 2002, Casey 2001 and 1996, Proshansky et al. 1983, Shumaker and Taylor 1983). To link these concepts, practitioners need to consider how the social and political processes and decisions that govern management and determine use of public lands arise from and negotiate visceral sensations, perceptions, and values – how personal experience affects public place-creation (Davenport and Anderson 2005).

That is why, in exploring the conflict over the Red Desert, I cannot help but discuss the Painted Desert. It is located within Petrified Forest National Park, and thus public land as well. Though managed by different agencies, the Red Desert and Painted Desert contain many of the same natural and cultural features. Another researcher might discuss how different political designations and policies create and are created by different sociocultural senses of place, but I can’t think of the Painted Desert as a line on a map or a list of attributes; it is my experiences, my memory of land and sky. It is my desert. I want you to think of it as yours too, to care for it as ours, to understand and experience attachment to the place.

To demonstrate the role of personal experience in public place-creation, I invite you to come with me on a brief tour of the Red Desert then on to explore years’ worth of memories of and identification with the Painted Desert before returning to a theoretical analysis of public place-creation and discussion of the implications for phenomenological research and land management policy.
My Red Desert

I had never heard of the Red Desert until the controversy over land use became prominent in local and national media. The expressions of deep attachment to a seemingly empty place intrigued me, so I started to research the land and the people. I read journal articles, radio reports, travel guides, websites, and letters-to-the-editor and pestered friends and acquaintances to tell me more about what they knew of the region. The more I learned, the more I wanted to know. How did people perceive the desert? What sort of relationships had people developed with the desert? How did they communicate their personal feelings and professional positions? I engaged in more formal, structured “research” -- perused professional management documents and academic literature, interviewed a variety of interested stakeholders, and mapped ownership and attributes and toponyms.

After months of inquiry and interpretation, I thought I had developed a well-informed sense of the place as well as a handle on the controversy: it’s a simple enough equation, according to Terry Tempest Williams: “place + people = politics. In the American West, the simplicity becomes complicated very quickly as abstractions of philosophy and rhetoric turn into ground scrimmages” (Tempest Williams 2002, p. 3. See also Kemmis 1990). All I had to do was separate the philosophy and rhetoric from the ground to understand the scrimmaging; all I had left to do was experience the place first-hand, to “ground-truth” my research.

So I found myself driving across south-central Wyoming on Interstate 80 late one April afternoon. I had already been warned that “the face of the Red Desert that people see driving through on the interstate does not reflect the richest wildlife habitats or the prettiest landscapes or the areas indeed that are pristine and untouched. You [will] notice, driving through, oil and gas development, strip mines – you name it, – pipelines, powerline corridors everywhere” (BCA).
Verily, I didn’t see anything aside from dusty sagebrush, cracked pavement, and a few wispy clouds. In years’ worth of exploring, I’d seen similar scenes all over the West; I had accumulated stock memories of pretty landscapes and a delicious sense of space, but had no reason to remember the names and meanings of the actual locations.

This afternoon, though, I was in The Red Desert. I had a vested interest in – and thus a deeper appreciation for – the view out my window. Somewhere in that expanse, I thought to myself, there are herds of wild horses! And habitat for sage grouse! Petroglyphs and ruts from wagon trails, fossils and fossil fuels, all sorts of secret delights.

The Red Desert “is a land that gives up its secrets grudgingly” (Friends of the Red Desert 2008), though. Armed with lots of water, a car that was all-too familiar with bumpy dirt roads, a pair of sturdy hiking boots, and a long list of destinations and directions, I knew I would need to spend days hunting out people’s favorite places. Adobe Town! Desolation Flats! Jack Morrow Hills! I would experience it all!

But sometime during the night, a cold front moved through. I woke to a landscape of featureless whiteness buried under a shadowless grey sky. I stubbornly tried maneuvering the “Wild Horse Loop,” but when my car rebelled against the mix of clay and ice I returned to the main road and headed northeast away from Rock Springs. At some point, I passed the most photogenic features – Killpecker Dunes and Boars Tusk – but I don’t know when or where; I couldn’t see through the storm. Turning vaguely eastward, I stopped to read a historic marker, but the winds were so fierce that I didn’t get out of the car. The Visitor Center in Lander was closed, so on southeast to Rawlins, where I merged back on to Interstate 80 and found myself crossing the heart of the Red Desert for the second time.
So much for the experience. The Friends of the Red Desert insist that their place “has a way of drawing you in, inviting you to explore its mysteries (Friends of the Red Desert 2006), but it was telling me to go away. I was cold. And tired. I didn’t connect with the land at all, didn’t create personal meaning, let my conception of the place remain a flat mental map containing names and boundaries to which I attach no memories.

Well, one memory. Of the rush of delight I felt when I turned off the highway, parked on some little dirt lane near a gas well pad, pulled out the Utah and Arizona maps, and, with the snow swirling dryly across my windshield, planned my route south. To the Painted Desert. To my place.

My Painted Desert

When I had first paused to consider the “Welcome to Petrified Forest National Park” sign one grey November morning many years before, I had no idea what to expect. Indulging in a youthful desire for adventure, I had barely taken the time to confirm that the place was, indeed, in Arizona, and that yes, I could work there instead of spending another long winter in New Hampshire. I stopped at the Visitor Center to look at the displays and watch an interpretive film, but none of the information – Chinle Formation? Ancestral Puebloan? Short-grass prairie? – necessarily registered in my mind. So I got back in the car, drove through a half-mile or so of scrubby scenery, pulled into the first designated overlook, and had the bottom drop out of my sense of space. The Painted Desert. A labyrinth of vibrant clay hills, stretching beyond the horizon, rolling large as the sky, bigger and grander than anything I’d ever know. A legal and literal wilderness.
The sky was raw, the landscape forbidding, but I felt compelled to get out and experience the place first-hand. I switchbacked down the access trail, said farewell to the last juniper I could see for miles, dropped into a dry wash, slipped tentatively around the nose of a cliff, and whoosh! the cold dry wind burst straight through to my lungs. The Painted Desert. I was standing in it, breathing it in. No bootprints or cairns or other such comforts to cling to, just the earth and clouds and me.

I spent the rest of the winter cultivating that relationship between self and place, seeking a sense of belonging -- an existential insideness (Relph 1976). I learned to locate myself according to the bends in the Lithodendron Wash, the lonely verticals on the horizon, the layers of stone and time. I explored Angels Garden and the Black Forest, discovered the petrified stump field and petroglyph panels. I found fossil bones and pottery sherds, Indian paintbrush and bobcat prints; once I even tripped over a geologic marker – thousands of acres of sandstone and bentonite and sagebrush undulating in 30-foot waves and there it was, a 3-inch piece of metal hammered into the ground. Every time I had the chance to go out wandering, I would look out across the wide landscape and fix a destination in my mind, then inevitably find myself trekking miles and miles out of the way to a dead tree or glint of gypsum that had piqued my interest. I was driven by an infatuation with everything and everywhere Painted Desert.

After one season -- spent filling countless letters with descriptions of my adventures, countless sketchbooks with depictions of my impressions, countless hours with contemplation of the landscape -- I felt I had barely scratched the surface of the place. So I returned. I slowed down, savored experiences – biked the park road instead of driving, let others lead me to rock art galleries and ancient reptilian graveyards, tracked coyote through the snow. I stopped using a tent on my weekend backpacking expeditions -- just stretched out with the Milky Way or basked
in the full moon. I took any excuse to crawl on my hands and knees through the brush or up the cliffs – sometimes on serious scientific missions with the archaeologist or paleontologist or biologist, sometimes just to satisfy curiosity. I traced centuries’ of swirls in sandstone, thought like a lizard basking in the sun, swam in the scent of monsoon rains. I lived for the sunrises and sunsets – would walk out every morning, every evening, 5 miles then 10 to honor and attune to the rhythms of time and space.

Quiet sunrises and sunsets glow in my heart; a perilous journey back from Pilot Rock burns in my mind. With all of these experiences fermenting in my mind, I can’t understand why others don’t appreciate the desert -- the “clean air to breathe...; stillness, solitude, and space; an unobstructed view every day and every night of sun, sky, stars, clouds, mountains, moon, cliffrock and canyons; a sense of time enough to let thought and feeling range from here to the end of the world and back” (Abbey 1990, p. 39).

When a new roommate arrived one summer and immediately packed up again, wanting to leave because she was sure she couldn’t stand the dryness and desolation, I implored, “Please just give it time. Stay. You’ll love it,” thinking, “how can anyone not?” It took her a few weeks, but she slowly developed an interest in the cultural history, then gazed at the night sky, then found herself rhapsodizing about the beauty in the landscape, the adventure in the austerity. Yi-Fu Tuan wrote in his seminal work *Space and Place* that “[a]bstract knowledge about a place can be acquired in short order. But the ‘feel’ of a place takes longer to acquire. It is made up of experiences, mostly fleeting and undramatic, repeated day after day and over the span of years” (1977, pp. 183-184).

The first time I read Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire*, I hadn’t really understood his exhortation, “In the first place you can’t see anything from a car; you’ve got to get out of the
goddamned contraption and walk, better yet crawl, on hands and knees, over the sandstone and through the thornbush and cactus. When traces of blood begin to mark your trail you’ll see something, maybe” (1990, p. xiv). But the more time I took to experience the sandstone and cactus of the Painted Desert -- leaving my fair share of blood,-- the more I understood how passionately a person can care for a place, how deeply it can become part of them, how desperately they will want to share and protect it.

My job as an Interpreter was to share the Painted Desert – to provide visitors with the information they wanted to know about their National Park, but also to encourage them to pause and feel a deeper, personal connection to the place. I gave hundreds of formal talks and chatted informally with thousands of visitors about the geology the archaeology the ecology of the region, but so few -- too few –would linger to ask questions. I wrote articles for the park newsletter and made paintings for school programs and drew wildflowers for bulletins and photographed bones for scientific publications, but my art hardly did the attributes justice. Visitors would come, most would at best stop and snap a photograph of a geologic or topologic wonder that they couldn’t care to understand before continuing on their way to the Grand Canyon or Sedona. “Photographs won’t do it justice,” I wanted to shake them, “it’s a sense, it’s a feel, it’s a place, not just a scenic drive or splotch on the map.”

Although I feel a fierce desire to get people to experience the Painted Desert – to value the place as something more than pretty scenery, -- I don’t have to take drastic measures to protect it. As a designated Wilderness Area within a National Park, it is already afforded the highest level of protection possible for federal land management. No plans threaten to immediately and permanently alter the material characteristics of the place, my place. My memories of the land -- as well as my desires for future experiences -- remain safely intact.
But that is not the case for the Red Desert, where changing management priorities and plans have created a sense of insecurity and mistrust as well as a heightened awareness of and appreciation for the power of place-attachment. I have little first-hand experience and even less personal investment in the place, but I can empathize with those who do and thus want to understand and explain their situation.

Our Red Desert

When the Bureau of Land Management issued a Draft Environmental Impact Statement that would allow more roads and gas wells and fewer sagebrush and empty vistas in the Red Desert, they launched “an ideological battle…among those who value what is here” (Clifford 2002). It is not as simple as one reporter suggested, however, when he wrote that “[s]ome value what lies on the surface; some value what lies beneath” (Clifford 2002). The breadth and depth of the battle suggests a complex interaction between what can be considered “two types of attachment: attachment to the specific area itself and attachment to the type of area it represents” (Williams et al. 1992, p. 19).

The second type often receives more attention in land management research. Ideas and symbols – the Red Desert as pristine wilderness or desolate wasteland or rich mineral repository – power public place-creation. In launching a campaign to promote the region as the beautiful, ecologically-rich “Wild Heart of the West,” non-governmental organizations such as Friends of the Red Desert and the Biodiversity Conservation Alliance and even the Sierra Club acknowledge that they have been working locally and nationally to “educat[e] the public and show them what’s out there, so that we can burst this myth that it’s just this empty void that’s just waiting for drilling rigs and bulldozers to make dollars out of it” (BCA). These efforts seek
to replace the perceptions that “IT’s just the desert. If you gotta wreck someplace, it oughtta be this place” (BLM Rw 2) and that “there’s so much open space out there, so much undeveloped space that we can afford to just carve it up willy-nilly” (Artist) with the recognition that “[o]nce you criss-cross the Red Desert with drilling rigs and a road to every well pad, it really will damage the place” (Artist) and that “[w]hen you let roads develop willy-nilly, there is a loss of solitude, and that solitude is a fascinating thing” (Bill Crump, quoted in Clifford 2002). Solitude and space are powerful values – ones that have caught the public’s imagination and “generate[d] a response from people, even among people who have never even been to the place in dispute” (Cheng et al. 2003, p. 97).

People haven’t needed to go to the Red Desert to develop a sense of the place because societal organizations have produced articles and brochures, slide-shows and websites to allow you to experience the place second-hand. These materials, which use specific locations as symbols for abstract ideals, are filled with facts and figures that promote a political position -- namely a Red Desert Citizens’ Alternative that relies on the representative type of place attachment to advocate establishment of a National Conservation Area.

Maps of the proposed NCA place it outside of what some consider the Red Desert, however; people can’t even agree on where the place actually is, much less determine what it means or how it should be managed. As one interviewee mused, “the ranching families I’ve grown up around say they’re ‘going out to the Red Desert,’ [but couldn’t say exactly where they were going out to]” (Rancher); perceptions of the location and extent range from a half-million-acre patch of rusty soil north of the Interstate – sometimes referred to as the “Red Strip,” and “Red Desert Basin” – to a six-million-acre expanse that stretches all the way from Lander to the border of Colorado and encompasses much of the physiologically diverse Great Divide Basin.
This geographic ambiguity makes it difficult to discuss policies, especially because the most-often cited areas – including Adobe Town Wilderness Study Area and Desolation Flats Project Area – are not included in management documents. Officials express surprise and in some cases dismay to see “how [the Red Desert] has grown” in others’ eyes (BLM RS 1).

Although the borderless name “Red Desert” sprawls across maps and exists as a different “geographic location…in [different peoples’] mind[s]” (BLM Rw 3), it evokes powerful memories of and expressions of attachment to very specific places. Much of the strength of the campaign to “Save the Red Desert” can be attributed not to societal valuation but to wise recognition for and use of personal experiences. Rather than simply advocate certain uses for the Red Desert, organizations have encouraged individuals to shared their stories in the public sphere – to recount their encounter with a moose (BLM Rw 1) or a golden eagle “out in the remote corners” (BCA); to reminisce about the time they “sat in camp one spring morning” (Wyoming Wilderness Association 2006) or “first drove off the pavement into the Red Desert…” (Jones 2005) or went “…trudging across the Killpecker Dunes” (Clifford 2002). Artists have shared their memories and interpretations at galleries; ranchers have delighted in “telling stories, out there in places” (Rancher). The group Friends of the Red Desert advises people to contact their governmental representatives not to spout out rhetorical positions, but to “[t]alk about personal experiences and what you enjoy doing in the Red Desert” (Friends of the Red Desert 2006).

Beyond simply using existing senses of the place, groups have focused much effort on getting people out on the land to experience it for themselves – to learn first-hand that “[p]hotos don’t even do it justice. You can have great photos, but you really don’t get the same sense of space and grandeur and scale” (BCA). Tourism brochures detail “Scenic Drives” and BLM hand-outs provide directions to particularly popular spots and websites offer suggestions for
hiking destinations. Insisting that “[e]very Wyoming outdoors person must take a trip soon to
the Red Desert and experience the thrill and enchantment of hiking through the maze of
Honeycomb Buttes without another person or sound but that of the wind” (Wyoming
Wilderness Association 2006), Biodiversity Conservation Alliance offers a number of guided
driving and backpacking expeditions. As a member of the organization described the strategy:

“The best way for people to feel investment in these landscapes and to understand
the need to protect them is not to send them a ten-page diatribe or talk on the
radio or be in the newspaper – that doesn’t convey it. All you have to do is set
people in front of this landscape, and without saying anything to them at all, they
get it.” (BCA)

What is ‘it’? According to scholars, it’s a “construction” or “perception” or
“interpretation” or “endowment of value” (Williams and Stewart 1998, Cheng et al. 2003,
Davenport and Anderson 2005 and Stedman 2003, and Tuan 1977, respectively.
According to those who have experienced the Red Desert, it’s “a sense of the space, the
sound of the grass, the smell of the wind” (Lillegraven 2007). It’s a personal
appreciation for a public place.

Our Deserts

You may not realize that the Painted Desert is your National Park and/or that the Red
Desert is your public land. You may disapprove of boundary expansions and/or acknowledge the
value of oil and gas. You don’t need to get yourself stranded in the Wilderness Area or feel
obligated to drive across Wyoming to understand that some people love these places, know them
as their own but recognize that they’re shared.

The difficulty lies in weaving personal experiences and values and places into a web of
support for public land management practices. Thirty years ago, Tuan noted 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); his observation still rings true today, especially in relation to public land management. It’s far too easy for individuals to abandon their own stories in the public sphere and instead attempt to assert political positions; “Well I have a personal opinion,” admitted one interviewee, “and I have a professional opinion” (BCA). Even citizens who are not speaking for and/or employed by any agency or group may find themselves reciting stock lines such “I urge you to adopt the Western Heritage Alternative for a revised Great Divide Plan that will balance industrial uses of my public lands with the needs of public recreation, clean air and water, and desert wildlife” (http://www.voiceforthewild.org/greatdivide/letter0117.html, emphasis added).

The sociopolitical sphere undervalues personal perceptions and beliefs, relying on cold, hard use of the term “our public lands” instead of intimate, passionate appeals for personal places. Yet individual experience and attachment is often what grounds and fuels debate over land management policies and procedures. I have learned as much as I can about the Red Desert and empathize with others when they speak and/or write candidly about their place. Because I haven’t truly seen, smelled, felt the landscape, I haven’t attached to it as they have, but when people want to show me their photos of Boars Tusk, I think of my Pilot Rock; when people tell stories of watching day break over the hills of Adobe Town, I hear echoes of my sunrise strolls, the quiet blush of the sky over Chinde Mesa; when I read about the impacts of road construction in Wyoming, I recall gingerly avoiding microbiotic soils in Arizona. When I talk to ranchers, scientists, managers, visitors, citizens about their perceptions of the Red Desert, I also tell them about the Painted Desert. It’s an exchange, an inclusion. As Gary Snyder wrote, “our relation to the natural world takes place in a place, and it must be grounded in information and experience” (Snyder 1990, p. 39, his emphasis).
The theorist in me says that if you want to understand the conflict over the Red Desert, you need to ground yourself with both information and experience, to recognize it as a place. Read the official management documents and proposals for a National Conservation Area as well as the formal statements interest groups have published in response; peruse the opinion pieces and personal testimonies published in local and national media; talk to people about their perceptions and positions; look at their photographs and listen to their stories; try to see the place as others see it. But above all, go to the Red Desert. Stop somewhere, get out of the car, explore, feel the ground, smell the sky, go, appreciate it as your desert too.

But go to the Painted Desert first.

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Interviewee Codes

Note: The interviewees were encouraged to discuss personal perceptions and opinions, not professional positions; titles and codes are used only for identification purposes, and are not intended to be read as representative.


Length: 1 hour.


**Sportsman**: Rawlins resident and sportsman. May 5, 2006. 30 minutes.

**Rancher**: Third-generation rancher. August 18, 2006. 30 minutes.

**BCA**: Biodiversity Conservation Alliance employee. September 6, 2006. 1 hour, 30 minutes.

**FRD**: Friends of the Red Desert employee. October 11, 2006. 30 minutes.

**Artist**: Laramie resident and artist. February 4, 2007. 1 hour.