Incorporating the Natural Landscape Within an Assessment of Community Attachment

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ABSTRACT. An ecosystem approach to managing public natural areas requires that land planners and managers thoroughly understand the stakeholders who live within these ecosystems and are emotionally connected to the lands. Building on previous research conducted on community attachment, place attachment, and sense of place, this article explores how local stakeholders in two areas of Florida identify with and account for the natural landscape within their sense of community. To better capture the physical-natural landscape element currently unaccounted for in community attachment research, researchers explored how stakeholders identified with their communities and examined their attitudes and behaviors regarding local public natural areas. Results show the physical-natural landscape is an important part of how stakeholders identify with their community. Stakeholders who frequently visit surrounding public natural areas and identify these areas as an important part of why they live in the area are likely to identify more with the physical-natural landscape of their community than the social-cultural elements of their community. Determining how stakeholders identify with their community (natural landscape or social elements), offers public land managers a better understanding of the role the areas they manage play in local stakeholders’ daily lives, and how to best communicate with those stakeholders. FOR. SCI. 49(6):867–876.

Key Words: Ecosystem-based management, public natural areas, sense of place, place attachment.

Florida has one of the largest land acquisition programs in the United States. Each year thousands of hectares of land are purchased by the state and opened to public access. Efforts to include the surrounding communities in the management planning process of all public natural areas are critical in order to ensure area residents benefit from future management decisions (Harris et al. 1997, Stein et al. 1999a).

Public land management agencies continue to struggle with how to best include stakeholders within a planning framework (Williams and Stewart 1998). Ecosystem-based management is a holistic and collaborative approach to natural resources management intended to help managers broaden their thinking about the areas they manage, as well as include human dimensions often omitted from the decision-making process (Grumbine 1994, Stein et al. 1999a). An ecosystem-based management approach considers humans to be a part of ecosystems, recognizes the importance of people’s values and behaviors, and requires these values and behaviors be integrated into the decision-making process (Grumbine 1994, Schroeder 1996, Stein et al. 1999a). Schroeder (1996) urged agencies to recognize and incorporate stakeholders’ values early on in the planning process. The author speculated, “People’s emotional attachments to specific places have probably been an underlying factor in many of the controversies and appeals that have plagued the...
National Forest planning process” (Schroeder 1996, p. 1). If this is true, a better understanding of stakeholders’ emotional bonds should help public land planners and managers both anticipate and understand the public’s reactions to management efforts before controversies develop (Williams and Stewart 1998, Eisenhauer et al. 2000).

Although a large amount of research exists on the biophysical processes operating within natural areas, the social processes involved in managing ecosystems remain poorly understood (Williams et al. 1992). To help managers effectively implement ecosystem-based management, an in-depth knowledge of stakeholders is necessary. Recent literature suggests that community attachment, and similar attachment concepts, can be used to understand and incorporate community stakeholders’ values into an ecosystem-based management framework (Williams et al. 1992, McCool and Martin 1994, Williams and Stewart 1998, Warzecha and Lime 2001). Although extensive sociological research has examined sense of place and place attachment with regard to recreation and public land management, little research has specifically looked at community attachment issues related to public land management (Williams et al. 1995).

Sociologists began exploring the concept of community attachment to examine urbanization and its effect on the social structure and function of communities (Janowitz and Kasarda 1974, Goudy 1990, McCool and Martin 1994, Beggs et al. 1996). Community attachment is often used to gauge changes in the social structure of a community as it progresses toward urbanization and industrialization (Goudy 1990). More recently, social scientists have expanded the application of community attachment to examine residents’ attitudes toward tourism development (Sheldon and Var 1984, Um and Crompton 1987, McCool and Martin 1994, Williams et al. 1995).

In related research, natural resources management researchers have used the concept of sense of place to examine visitors’ strong emotional bonds to specific natural areas (Williams et al. 1992, Eisenhauer et al. 2000). Literature exploring the concept of sense of place and place attachment suggests public natural areas significantly influence how residents feel about their community (Williams et al. 1992, Eisenhauer et al. 2000). However, little research has linked attitudes toward natural landscapes with residents’ attachment to their community (Williams et al. 1995).

This article seeks to expand the application of community attachment to natural resources management by incorporating the natural landscape into an assessment of local stakeholders attachment to their community. To accomplish this, a study of two regions in Florida was conducted to explore how local stakeholders’ identify with and account for the natural landscape within their community. Specifically, this study sought to (1) identify if stakeholders were more oriented to the physical-natural landscape of their community or the social-cultural elements of their community; (2) explore the relationship between stakeholders’ orientation and their association with local public natural areas; and (3) explore the relationship between orientation and community attachment (measured by length of residence and local sentiment).

Measuring Community Attachment

“There are different ways of being attached, ways that are not strongly related to one another. And different types of people are attached in different ways.” (Gerson et al. in Goudy 1990, p. 196)

Despite extensive research efforts, it has proven difficult to develop reliable measurements for factors that consistently contribute to community attachment (Goudy 1990, McCool and Martin 1994, Beggs et al. 1996). As articulated by Gerson et al. (1977), much of the difficulty in finding a reliable set of factors is due to the variability among residents and within communities. Communities reflect the diversity of attitudes and perceptions held by residents; therefore, community attachment can be described in many ways.

Traditionally, sociologists used two measures to investigate community attachment: (1) social bonds, measured by two separate variables (proportions of friends and relatives in a respondent’s community, number of organizational memberships); and (2) local sentiment, measured by three variables (sense of community, interest in community, and sorrow to leave) (Janowitz and Kasarda 1974, Goudy 1990). In response to the linear development model that held that increasing population, population density, and heterogeneity of communities would weaken community attachments, Janowitz and Kasarda (1974) developed and tested the systemic model using population size and density, length of residency, socioeconomic status, and family life cycle as key systemic factors to explain the strength of community attachment (Beggs et al. 1996). In contrast to the proposition of the linear model, the authors found that population and population density had little influence on community attachment. Of the variables included in the systemic model, length of residence was considered the most important variable to predict attachment (Janowitz and Kasarda 1974).

Because attachment and length of residence have been found to be highly correlated in several tourism-related studies, length of residence was often used alone as a measure of community attachment (Sheldon and Var 1984, Um and Crompton 1987). However, there are rumblings within the literature that suggest length of residence, by itself, is not an appropriate measurement of attachment (McCool and Martin 1994, Williams et al. 1995). McCool and Martin (1994) suggest that a person can become attached to a community in a short period of time. The authors speculate that a new resident with high community attachment uses the physical landscape as a frame of reference, whereas a long-term resident relates more to the social-cultural aspects of the community that are traditionally measured by the variables identified above. However, research has not conclusively shown this to be true.

Orientation, defined in this study as residents’ identification with the physical-natural landscape or social aspects of their community, is the focus of this research. Few researchers have addressed residents’ relationships with the physical-natural landscape in an assessment of community attachment (McCool and Martin 1994, Williams et al. 1995). Responding to McCool and Martin’s (1994) speculation that the community attachment concept has
mainly focused on friendship and network ties, Williams et al. (1995) encouraged further research to determine if community stakeholders identified more with cultural values-way of life, physical-natural landscapes, or friendships-social networks. Although community attachment literature suggests that attachment is most strongly related with social ties (Goudy 1990, McCool and Martin 1994), little research has been done specifically exploring how residents incorporate the physical-natural landscape into their identification with and attachment to their community (Williams et al. 1995).

**Sense of Place and Place Attachment**

Research on sense of place, also referred to as place attachment, explores residents’ identification with the natural landscape in their community. Although place attachment research typically refers to specific places or landscapes (Williams et al. 1992, Eisenhauer et al. 2000), the concept can be used to explore the overall identification with the natural landscape that may occur in the context of community attachment.

Place attachment has a long history across multiple disciplines, including geography, environmental psychology, urban and regional planning, and recreation (Williams et al. 1992, Warzecha and Lime 2001). Tuan (1977, p. 6) suggested that space is transformed into place when humans assign some sort of value to it. Sense of place manifests itself as an emotional bond between an individual and specific place. This bond may vary in its intensity, from a short-term sensory pleasure to a long-term, deep-rooted attachment to a specific place (Williams et al. 1995).

Researchers have developed several models to analyze the levels of attachment individuals form with specific places (Shumaker and Taylor 1983). Within the psychology and environmental psychology literature, place dependence and place-identity are the two primary frameworks used by researchers to help explain the types of attachments people have to specific places (Williams et al. 1992, Warzecha and Lime 2001).

Place dependence (Stokols and Shumaker 1981) is primarily an essence of function. That is, the value of a specific place depends on how much the specific place can satisfy the behavioral goals of an individual and how it compares with other available alternatives (Williams et al. 1992). Place dependence suggests that a person becomes attached to a specific place because it meets their needs better than any alternative sites. Place dependence has been used by a number of recreation researchers to describe individuals’ preferences for particular recreation settings. Factors predicting place dependence are linked to an individual’s history of association (e.g., use history) (Williams et al. 1992, Eisenhauer et al. 2000).

Place identity as defined by Proshanksy et al. (1983), describes attachment to place in terms of emotional or symbolic meanings assigned by an individual. Place identity suggests that the physical landscape or place is one of many variables that contribute to a person’s self-identity (Warzecha and Lime 2001). Unlike place dependence, which requires that an individual use the resource, it is possible for individuals to develop a strong attachment to an area without ever visiting that area. According to Williams et al. (1992, p.32), “A place’s value is assigned by individuals, groups, or society without necessarily involving a strong correspondence between the physical attributes of the place and its meaning.” Wilderness areas are often subject to strong place identity attachments. Many people express a strong attachment to wilderness areas even though most have never visited one (Nash 1982, p. 200–271).

Combining measures of place attachment and sense of place with those traditionally used to examine community attachment is a useful way to examine how people living next to public natural areas incorporate these areas into their attachment to community.

**Methods**

**Study Areas**

Florida is one of the fastest growing states in the nation. Facing increasing population and urbanization pressures, planners and managers of Florida’s public lands recognize the need to better understand and incorporate community stakeholders into planning efforts to effectively manage the land. The two study areas represent regions typifying growth and development trends in Florida.

The Apalachicola River region provides researchers with a chance to explore how residents identify with their communities in a largely rural region. The region is relatively homogeneous, with mostly resource-dependent communities scattered along the Apalachicola River and Bay, and other natural areas.

The Fort Myers region represents the opposite side of the spectrum. One of the fastest growing and most densely populated areas in the state, the region is fairly heterogeneous in community makeup: large cities such as Naples and Cape Coral/Fort Myers are adjacent to rural, inland communities. The population growth in the region is echoed throughout the state and provides an opportunity to study how residents identify with their communities in a region that has experienced rapid growth and development over the past 20 yr.

**Apalachicola River Region**

The Apalachicola River region is primarily rural and includes many attractive, undeveloped natural areas (Figure 1). The Apalachicola River crosses into Florida from Georgia and enters the Gulf of Mexico at the town of Apalachicola in Franklin County. The river and Gulf Coast are rich in amenity and economic resources. Public natural areas make up a large percentage of the lands within the region, and include Florida’s largest national forest (Apalachicola), two national wildlife refuges (St. Marks and St. Vincent), several state-managed lands, and a variety of small county and city natural areas. Traditionally, these natural areas contributed to the region’s major economic industries—timber and seafood. However, as job opportunities and income from these industries steadily decline, community planners and land managers are focusing on nature-based tourism as a possible economic development tool.
The total population for the Apalachicola River region is just over 350,000. The region has some of the most rural counties in the state. Communities within the region are small and scattered along the borders of the public natural areas or along the river and bay. The only metropolitan area in the region is Tallahassee. Over the past 10 yr (1990–2000), the region has experienced an increase in population comparable to the overall state growth rate (23.5%). However, the Apalachicola River region may see population and levels of development significantly increase over the next 10 to 20 yr, as tourism continues to grow and private areas once managed for natural resources industries (e.g., pine plantations) are turned into residential developments.

**Fort Myers Region**

The Fort Myers region is more heterogeneous in community composition than the Apalachicola River region (Figure 2). The region hosts three urban-metropolitan areas—Cape Coral/Fort Myers, Naples, and Punta Gorda, which are situated along the Gulf coastline. Several smaller communities traditionally dependent on timber, agriculture, and ranching are scattered throughout the more inland portions of the region. Many of these smaller, rural inland communities are adjacent to public lands set aside for recreation, and there is interest among community and land planners to market these areas as nature-based tourism destinations. Compared with the Apalachicola River region, there are relatively few large public natural areas. Most large public natural areas are situated inland, with smaller natural areas scattered along the coastline.

With a population of over 800,000, the Fort Myers region is one of the fastest growing and most densely populated areas in the state. The urban areas are primarily concentrated along the coastline or near major highways. Over the past 20 yr, most of the communities within the region have seen their populations at least double in size. Also striking about this region is the high percentage of people over age 65. Adults older than 65 compose nearly...
one-third of the region’s population, well above the state average (17.6%). Census data show most of the older adult population located in the unincorporated areas of the region, both inland and along the outskirts of the metropolitan areas.

**Study Participants**

Past research indicates in-depth public participation and knowledge of stakeholders’ preferences is critical to designing successful management initiatives on public lands (Harris et al. 1997, Stein et al. 1999a). Community attachment is traditionally concerned with friendship and network ties; little attention has been given to the contribution of the physical-natural landscape within the concept of community attachment (McCool and Martin 1994, Williams et al. 1995). Because the purpose of this research was to explore how people incorporate the physical-natural landscape as part of their attachment to community, research focused on the stakeholders of nearby public natural areas.

A purposive sampling approach was used to identify potential study participants. Participants from Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) nominal group meetings held in the two regions were sent a letter requesting contact information of stakeholders they believed were interested in the management of public natural areas. Communities within the region were listed as possible recruiting areas. Researchers then sent a similar letter to the contacts provided by the nominal group participants and requested additional contacts. Questionnaires were then sent to the entire list of contacts, including the original FWC nominal group participants and the first and second round of contacts.

Because this sample was purposely selected, results cannot be inferred to the larger populations of Fort Myers and Apalachicola. However, results do provide an important understanding of people who are active in land management decision-making.
Administration and Analysis

Survey methods recommended by Salant and Dillman (1994, p. 137–148) were modified and used to maximize response rates. Participants were mailed a survey enclosed with a postage-paid envelope and cover letter explaining the study. Participants were sent a reminder postcard and two followup questionnaires. Upon receiving the questionnaire, participants were presented with a map of the designated region on the cover of the survey. Public natural areas were identified as well as major roadways, water bodies, and surrounding towns and cities. Participants were asked to refer to the regional map throughout the survey.

For Apalachicola, 40% of respondents returned questionnaires (48 people), and 57% of Babcock-Webb respondents (50 people) returned questionnaires.

Because study objectives were to describe rather than predict phenomena, researchers relied on descriptive statistics to analyze data. Where it was necessary to identify relationships between variables, researchers used contingency tables to generate Chi-square ($\chi^2$) values. Data were analyzed using SPSS v. 10.0.

Questionnaire Design

Researchers designed the questionnaire to achieve the three study objectives. The questions used in the questionnaire to achieve the study objectives are described below and in Table 1.

Objective 1. Identify if stakeholders were more oriented to the physical-natural landscape of their community or the social-cultural characteristics of their community.

Based on suggestions by Williams et al. (1995), participants were asked to identify the aspect of living in their community they most identified with: the friendships and social connections; the values, culture(s)/way of life; or the physical-natural landscape category. Respondents who indicated friendships/social connections were combined with those who indicated values/cultures/way of life to form one group categorized as socially oriented. Respondents who identified the physical-natural landscape category were grouped as landscape oriented.

Objective 2. Explore the relationship between stakeholders’ orientation and their association with local public natural areas.

Based largely on previous research (Harris et al. 1997, Eisenhauer et al. 2000), three questions were used to help researchers explore the relationship between stakeholders’ orientation (using the questions described above) and their association with nearby natural areas:

1. Approximately how far away do you live from a public natural area? (measured by using the scale: 0–5 miles, 6–15 miles, 16–30 miles, 31–60 miles, over 60 miles away);
2. How important was living next to a public natural area in choosing where you live? (measured by using the scale: primary reason, important but not primary reason, not very important, not at all important); and
3. In the past 12 months, approximately how many times have you visited a public natural area in the region? (measured by using an open ended response).

Participants were categorized into appropriate groups based on their responses for each question, and contingency table analysis was used to compare participants’ orientation (i.e., Objective 1) to the three measures of association with public natural areas.

Objective 3. Explore the relationship between orientation and community attachment (measured by length of residence and local sentiment).

Table 1. Variables used to measure orientation, association with public natural areas, and community attachment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Questions and possible responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>What aspect of living in your community do you most identify with?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The friendships and social connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The values, culture(s), and way of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The physical-natural landscape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Association with public natural areas</td>
<td>Approximately how far away do you live from a public natural area?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 0–5 miles, 6–15 miles, 16–30 miles, 31–60 miles, over 60 miles away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How important was living next to a public natural area in choosing where you live?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 1 = Primary reason . . . 4 = Not at all important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In the past 12 months, approximately how many times have you visited a public natural area in the region?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• [Open-ended] Number of visits to nearby public natural area in past 12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community attachment</td>
<td>Length of residency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• [Open-ended] Total number of years in community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local sentiment</td>
<td>a) How much do you feel at home in this community?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 1 = Not at all . . . 5 = Very much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b) Suppose that for some reason you had to move away from your community, how sorry or pleased would you be to leave?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 1 = Very sorry . . . 5 = Very pleased</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Again, orientation was identified by using the questions described in Objective 1. Following previous research methods (McCool and Martin 1994), community attachment was measured two ways:

1. Length of residence—measured by the total number of years respondents reported living in the community.

2. Local sentiment—measured by study participants’ response to two five-point Likert-scaled questions: “How sorry or pleased would you be if you had to leave your community?” (1 = Very Sorry to 5 = Very Pleased); and “How much at home do you feel in the community?” (1 = Not at All to 5 = Very Much). A principal component analysis showed participants’ responses could be combined into a single value reflecting local sentiment (Eigenvalue 0.72). Therefore, the two scales were added together for each respondent, and respondents were divided into stakeholders with low local community sentiment (participants with a score between 2 and 7) and stakeholders with high local sentiment (participants with a score between 8 and 10).

Contingency table analysis was again conducted to explore the relationship between orientation (i.e., Objective 1) and the two measures of community attachment.

**Results**

**Orientation**

A t-test was performed to determine any significant differences in orientation between respondents in the two regions. Finding no significant difference (n = 91, t = -1.29, P = 0.20) the datasets were combined. A total of 37 (40.7%) respondents were identified as socially oriented and 54 (56.8%) respondents were identified as landscape oriented. All other objectives are addressed according to respondents’ orientation (i.e., physical-natural landscape or social aspects).

**Orientation and Association with Public Natural Areas**

The majority of respondents (76.3%) report living within 15 miles of the nearest public natural area. Results reveal no significant relationship between orientation and distance from the nearest natural area (χ² = 2.75, df = 2, P = 0.25) (Table 2). Although not statistically significant, the data depict a trend that the further respondents live from a public natural area, the less likely they will be landscape oriented. This lack of significance might be due to the fact more than 75% of the respondents lived within 15 miles of a public natural area.

A significant relationship exists between orientation and the importance respondents place on living next to a public natural area (χ² = 6.11, df = 2, P = 0.05) (Table 2). Compared to socially oriented respondents, almost twice as many landscape oriented respondents rate living next to a public natural area as their primary reason for their choice of residence. In contrast, nearly one-quarter (24%) of socially oriented stakeholders rate living next to a public natural area as not important, compared with only 8% of landscape oriented respondents.

There is a significant relationship between stakeholders’ orientation and the average number of times they visited a local public natural area (Table 2). Results show stakeholders who visited local public natural areas more than 12 times over the last year identified more with the physical-natural landscape of their community than with social aspects of their community. Of the socially oriented respondents, 74% reported they visited a local public natural area less than 12 times over the past 12 months.

**Orientation and Community Attachment**

As in past research (McCool and Martin 1994), this study considered length of residence and local sentiment (i.e., sorrow to leave and feeling at home) as measures of community attachment. Through contingency table analysis, these measures were compared with stakeholders’ orientation to the physical-natural landscape or social aspects of their community. Results indicate that length of residence is not significantly related to a respondent’s orientation with the landscape or social characteristics of a community (Table 3). Respondents were fairly evenly distributed within length of residence; more than half of the respondents in both groups had lived in the community less than 20 yr. However, slightly more socially oriented respondents had lived in the region more than 20 yr (43%).

Results also reveal no significant relationship between respondents with high levels of local sentiment (combined scale score of 8–10) or low local sentiment levels (combined scale score of 7 or less) and orientation. However, any relationship would be difficult to describe because over 80% of both groups of respondents indicated being highly attached to their community.

**Table 2. Relationship between orientation and measures of association with public natural areas.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Social orientation</th>
<th>Landscape orientation</th>
<th>χ²</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distance living from public natural area</td>
<td>n = 37</td>
<td>n = 52</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-5 miles</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-15 miles</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 15 miles</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of living next to a public natural area</td>
<td>n = 37</td>
<td>n = 52</td>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>0.05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary reason</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important, not primary</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not important</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of visits to a local public natural area</td>
<td>n = 34</td>
<td>n = 52</td>
<td>7.16</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 12 times/yr</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>44</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 12 times/yr</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>56</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant at the 0.05 level.
Discussion

Understanding the complexity of stakeholders’ emotional attachments to their community is an important part of implementing ecosystem-based management. Although results indicate that a stakeholder’s orientation to landscape or to social characteristics does not influence the level of attachment they have for their community, results suggest the physical-natural landscape is an important component of how some residents relate to their community.

This finding has particular importance in the implementation of ecosystem-based management. As Williams and Patterson point out (1999, p. 156), “If we have the capacity to manage anything, at least directly, it is more likely the social system.” Ecosystems are socially constructed places, and the better land managers understand the role natural areas play in the lives of area residents, the more successful they will be in managing those ecosystems. Public land managers are often surprised and unprepared for the emotions local people have toward public land management decision-making (Tipple and Wellman 1989, McDonough 1993). This study helps to explain why these strong emotions exist.

Incorporating stakeholders’ identification with the physical-natural landscape of their community is the next step of a seemingly natural progression within community attachment research. However, it is important to note that results seem to confirm previous research (McCool and Martin 1994, Williams et al. 1995), as many study participants, despite being selected for their interest in nearby public natural areas, identified most with the social components of their community.

The following section describes stakeholders in terms of their orientation to the landscape or to social qualities of their community. Based on these descriptions, implications that inform decision-making and planning will be discussed.

Landscape Oriented Stakeholders

Place attachment literature suggests that the history of association with a specific area influences the level of an individual’s attachment to that area (Eisenhauer et al. 2000). For this study, researchers explored how an individual’s association with natural areas in a community might relate to the way he or she identified with his or her community. Association was measured by proximity to the nearest natural area, visits to a natural area, and importance of living near a natural area.

This study showed landscape oriented stakeholders experienced greater association with the natural areas. Local stakeholders who identify more with the physical-natural aspects of their community visit natural areas more often than stakeholders who are more oriented to the social-cultural aspects of their community. Landscape oriented stakeholders were also more likely to choose to live in an area because they value nearby natural areas.

Results suggest public land management planners and managers must work with landscape oriented stakeholders in a distinct way. According to Eisenhauer et al. (2000, p. 423), “Emotional attachments to place represent a unique sense of place, one that involves unusually strong sentiments about places and heightened concerns about their management.” Landscape oriented stakeholders would probably demand a greater say in the specifics of managing a natural area since they are likely to know the area better than socially oriented stakeholders. For example, landscape oriented stakeholders might be more likely to fight the closing of a specific campsite or road than socially oriented stakeholders.

Furthermore, because they visit nearby natural areas more than socially oriented stakeholders, it is likely they seek and attain more personal benefits from those areas (e.g., physical fitness, stress relief, and learning) (Driver and Bruns 1999). The benefits landscape oriented stakeholders receive from these local natural areas are probably benefits they believe are important to their communities (Stein et al. 1999b).

Socially Oriented Stakeholders

Although all participants were selected for this study because they expressed an interest in the management of local public natural areas, almost half of the participants identified more with the social-cultural aspects of their community. This study expands upon previous research (McCool and Martin 1994, Williams et al. 1995) by specifically showing that many community residents who are most active in land management planning (i.e., stakeholders) are still more strongly tied to the social characteristics of their community than to the physical-natural landscape.

In terms of ecosystem-based management, the way stakeholders identify with their community affects the way land managers and planners must communicate with these stakeholders. When working with socially oriented stakeholders, land managers and planners should communicate in terms of the social and cultural aspects of their community. As defined in this study, these community stakeholders have already expressed an interest in the management of natural areas (i.e., they are stakeholders); however, this type of resident might view natural areas as a way to attain benefits to their overall community, as opposed to benefits that they might attain as individuals. For example, socially oriented stakeholders might focus on the overall natural landscape and take particular interest in the economic or quality of life benefits that natural areas might provide to their communities (Stein et al. 1999b).
Because they do not visit the natural areas as much as landscape oriented stakeholders, land management decisions affecting specific areas might not be as important to them. Natural area planners should work closely with socially oriented stakeholders on large-scale issues that might affect the landscape/community relationship (e.g., establishing new land-use policies or regulations, setting new nature-based tourism initiatives, purchasing large natural areas for conservation).

Conclusions

Results indicate that residents identify with different aspects of their community; for some residents, the physical-natural landscape is an important part of how they relate to their community. Both socially and landscape oriented stakeholders indicated high levels of attachment with the community. Although it was beyond the scope of this article, future research should examine why people identify more with one aspect of their community than another.

The fact that more than 80% of the participants in this study indicated high levels of attachment limits the ability of researchers to probe what factors influence attachment. Since this study specifically selected community residents who had an interest in the planning and decision-making process of public natural areas, it is likely they are active in other forms of community planning. Past research indicates that active community members may be more inclined to be highly attached to their communities (Janowitz and Kasarda 1974).

The data from this study did not support or refute the idea that length of residence was related with a resident’s orientation. McCool and Martin (1994) suggest that newer residents in tourism-dependent communities might express a more landscape oriented attachment, whereas longer term residents have been in the area long enough to form emotional/social bonds and might express a socially oriented attachment. Although tourism is a leading industry in the Fort Myers region and is growing in the Apalachicola River region, this study found no significant relationship between respondents’ orientation and their length of residency in the region. A larger and more diverse sample of community residents might better address the relationship between length of residence and attachment orientation.

More research is needed to clarify and expand on this study’s findings. Future research should examine community residents (i.e., stakeholders) on a much broader scale. This study specifically selected community residents who already expressed an interest in natural areas. A random sample of community residents should be investigated to determine the extent entire community populations identify with the physical-natural aspects of their community. Research should also question which factors influence residents to identify more with one aspect of their community than another. Although not apparent in our data, orientation to social-cultural or physical-natural aspects of the community may vary between rural communities and urban areas. Research should examine this potential variability between different types of communities.

Better understanding the role of public natural areas in community attachment may help land managers communicate with the public. This study suggests managers may need to approach stakeholders differently and talk about public areas in terms of their overall community rather than parcels of land disconnected from the community. However, effective tools and techniques to reach out to the public and involve all stakeholders in decision-making are still needed (Webler et al. 2001). Research that examines the efficacy of different communication strategies in terms of socially and landscape oriented stakeholders, could improve the ways land planners and managers communicate and collaborate with local stakeholders.

Literature Cited


