

RECREATIONAL ACTIVITY AND PLACE MEANING

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Abstract

Although past research has documented the association between the types of activities an individual undertakes in a particular setting and the intensity of attachment that they hold for that place, little work has investigated the connection between activity type and place meaning. This lack of empirical evidence is most likely due to the fact that most place meaning studies have sought to describe the thoughts and feelings individuals ascribe to a place rather than to understand the relationships involved in meaning formation. Using data collected from a survey of recreational visitors to Australia's Great Barrier Reef, this investigation attempted to identify the connections between individuals' type of activity participation and the meanings they ascribed to the setting in which they recreated. Results indicated that, after controlling for visitation frequency, the importance of certain meanings to the individual does vary between activity types.

1.0 Introduction

Since Tuan's (1977) suggestion that a setting is a "blank space" that only becomes a "place" as it is endowed with meanings through lived experiences, only a few researchers (e.g., Lee 1972, Williams & Patterson 1996, Kyle & Chick, 2007) have attempted to investigate the social construction of place meanings. Such research has suggested that place meanings are fostered by "being at and engaging with a place and one's companions, extended stays, ritualized behaviors, family history in the outdoors, childhood socialization, and informal training and social learning" (Brooks et al., 2006, p. 339).

Given that meanings are rooted in interactions with the setting and others in the setting, it is logical to hypothesize that different recreational activities (that allow for differing levels of interactions with the place and others) would be associated with different types of meanings. In fact, the literature already contains evidence of the relationship between the related concept of place attachment and activity type (Moore & Scott 2003, Kyle et al. 2004). The lack of empirical evidence supporting the association between place meaning and activity type is mainly due to the interpretive designs of most place meaning studies. These studies often sought to describe meanings individuals ascribed to particular settings rather than to understand the relationships involved in meaning formation. Hence, the purpose of our study was to investigate the connections between recreational visitors' type of activity participation and the meanings they ascribed to the setting in which they recreated.

2.0 Background: Place Meaning

First conceptualized by Tuan (1977), place meanings are the cognitions and evaluative beliefs concerning a setting that reflect the value and significance of the setting to the individual (Stedman 2002). Meanings are often assigned to important attributes in a setting that include both the physical characteristics of the setting and the social interaction that is experienced there (Eisenhauer et al. 2000). Because place meanings are an amalgamation of social, psychological, and cultural interpretations, they have a dynamic nature that is difficult to study. Given this fluidity, most place meaning research has sought to describe the thoughts and feelings ascribed to a setting at a particular point in time, rather than to explore the relationships between place meaning and other constructs.

To identify associations between place meaning and potentially related constructs, it is necessary to understand that meanings are created through lived experiences (direct or indirect) as a product of the setting, the individual, and their social worlds (Kyle & Chick 2007). These interactions involve the assimilation of information stemming from sources external and internal to the individual. External information includes the popular media, tourist brochures, books, and friends and family who have previously visited the setting. For returning visitors, memories of past experience have an impact on shaping place meaning (Wynveen et al. 2010). Thus, the range and importance of meanings that an individual ascribes to a place is constrained by the attributes of the setting, the individual's cognitions and perceptions related to the setting, and the individual's interaction with others in relation to the setting. Hence, we suggest that different activities allow for differing interactions to be experienced by the individual; therefore the individual will ascribe diverse meanings to a setting as a result of the activities in which they participate within the setting. These differences will be evidenced in the level of importance they assign to the various meanings they ascribe to the setting.

Our hypothesis concerning a place meaning–activity type association is supported by a handful of studies (e.g., Vorkinn & Riese 2001, Moore & Scott 2003, Kyle et al. 2004) in the place literature. These authors have empirically identified a relationship between the related concept of place attachment (i.e., the intensity of the human-place bond (Kyle et al. (2003)) and activity type. For example, Moore and Scott found that in-line skaters expressed greater attachment to a trail than other users. Vorkinn and Riese (2001) were able to explain 40-60% of the variance in place attachment to individuals' local residences from use intensity, use history, and type of recreational activity in which Norwegian residents participated. However, even though place meaning and attachment intensity are closely related, it cannot be assumed that the same is true for place meaning and activity type. Hence, this investigation attempts to fill that gap.

3.0 Methods

3.1 Study Setting and Sample

The data used in this analysis were obtained from a sample consisting of Queensland, Australian residents living adjacent to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (GBRMP). The sample was identified via a telephone survey that was part of a larger study on the values associated with the Great Barrier Reef. Phone survey respondents were asked if they would participate in a follow-up written survey. This procedure elicited a 49% (n=324) response rate.

The respondents' age ranged from 18 to 82 years ($M = 50$; $SD = 13.8$). Just over half were male (57%). Only a few had not completed their secondary education (6%) and most had attended a technical college (58%) or university (29%). Respondents' incomes were well dispersed with about half (52%) earning less than \$60,000 (AUD) a year and almost one-third earning between \$60,000 and \$99,999. All respondents indicated that they had visited the GBRMP to participate in a recreational activity.

3.2 Survey Design

To identify the association between activity type and place meaning, we collected data using a sequential exploratory design (i.e. qualitative data collection followed by quantitative). In previous work, we conducted 20 key informant interviews that identified 10 themes of meanings that recreational visitors ascribed to the GBRMP. Those meanings were labeled: *aesthetic beauty*; *lack of built infrastructure/pristine environment*; *abundance and diversity of coral and other wildlife*; *unique natural resource*; *facilitation of desired recreational activity*; *safety and accessibility*; *curiosity and exploration*; *connection with the natural environment*; *escape from their everyday*; and *family and friends* (for details on the methods used to identify these themes and a full description of each theme, see Wynveen et al.2010).

For the current investigation, in addition to demographic items, we used the survey items related to the importance of place meanings, frequency of recreational visits to the GBR, and activity type participation. The place meaning items were based on the 10 meaning themes emerging from the key informant interviews; the survey included 34 statements representing these 10 themes. For each statement, respondents were asked to indicate the importance of each of the meaning statements to them in regards to the GBRMP. The visitation item asked respondents to indicate the number of times they had visited the GBRMP in the month preceding the survey. Lastly, we asked respondents to select, from a list of 15 activities, the activity that "was their primary reason for visiting the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park most recently." Most respondents selected *fishing* or *walking along the beach*. Hence, due to the number of responses needed in each group to conduct the statistical analysis, these were the only activities included in this investigation.

3.3 Analysis

After conducting a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to assess the place meaning model, 10 new variables were created, based on the mean of the items loading onto each factor, to represent each of the place meanings that were ascribed the GBRMP. Then we carried out a MANCOVA to determine whether there was an association between the respondents' type of activity and the mean importance they assigned to each meaning. The MANCOVA was conducted utilizing recreational activity type as the fixed factor, each of the 10 constructed place meaning variables as the dependent variables, and visitation frequency to the GBRMP as a covariate.

4.0 Findings

To begin, we calculated descriptive statistics for each group. Recreational activity participation rates for walkers (number of times in the past year: $M=38$; $SD=83.4$) were higher than anglers (number of times in the past year: $M=11$; $SD=15.0$). We also observed that walkers and anglers both had a mean age of 50 and did not differ on mean education or income levels. However, walkers were more often female (walkers: 57.1%; anglers: 20.0%).

The results of the CFA of the 34 place meaning items into the ten place meaning themes that emerged from the key informant interviews were a good fit for these data ($\chi^2=608.30$, $df=360$; $RMSEA=.08$; $NFI=.94$; $NNFI=.97$; $CFI=.97$). We began the MANCOVA by testing the overall significance of the models. The results indicated that the model was significant for only four of the dependent variables (i.e., place meanings): *curiosity and exploration* ($F_{df=2,126}=3.13$, $p=.05$); *facilitation of desired recreation activity* ($F_{df=2,126}=8.08$, $p<.01$); *escape from the everyday* ($F_{df=2,126}=3.38$, $p=.04$); and *connection to the natural world* ($F_{df=2,126}=3.41$, $p=.04$).

Next, we tested the effects of each of the fixed factors on the significant meanings identified in the overall model test. As recorded in Table 1, we observed that, while frequency of visitation was significant for all four meanings (*curiosity and exploration*: $F_{df=1}=6.25, p=.01$; *facilitation of desired recreation activity*: $F_{df=1,126}=4.54, p=.03$; *escape from the everyday*: $F_{df=1,126}=6.22, p=.01$; and *connection to the natural world*: $F_{df=1,126}=6.50, p=.01$), the type of recreational activity (i.e., fishing versus walking along the beach) was only significant for the *facilitation of desired recreational activity* meaning ($F_{df=5,126}=494.82, p<.01$).

<Insert Table 1 about here>

Finally, we conducted a post hoc test to verify that, in fact, the respondents' rating of the importance of the *facilitation of desired recreational activity* meaning differed between anglers and walkers. The results shown in Table 2 indicate that those respondents who went fishing on their last trip to the GBRMP placed significantly more importance on the *facilitation of desired recreational activity* meaning ($M=4.15, SD=.80$) than respondents who indicated that their primary recreational activity was walking along the beach ($M=3.56, SD=1.06$) ($F_{df=1,126}=12.87, p<.01$).

<Insert Table 2 about here>

5.0 Discussion

Identifying and understanding the association between activity type and place meaning provides insight into how meanings are formed and maintained. Our findings provide empirical evidence supporting the ideas of Tuan (1977) and other place authors. First, the observation that the covariate 'frequency of visitation' was associated with differing importance levels of place meanings supports the suggestions and observations of researchers (e.g., Manzo 2005) who have indicated that meanings are formed, in part, through repeated visitation. Based on past literature (e.g., Eisenhauer et al. 2000, Kyle & Chick 2007; Wynveen et al. 2010), we suggest that repeated visitation allows for lived experiences that afford individuals the opportunity to interact with the setting and others in the setting. These experiences form memories that are linked in the individual's mind to the setting in which they occurred. Finally, the memories are the basis for the cognitive and evaluative beliefs (i.e., meanings) that the individual ascribes to the place. These meanings then become part of the experience (by creating anticipation) when the individual returns to the setting.

Secondly, the result that the importance of the *facilitation of desired recreational activity* meaning varied between two different recreational user groups provides partial empirical support for our hypothesis that different activity types are associated with different place meanings. It is clear that, for these respondents, those who fished had a more salient *facilitation of desired recreational activity* meaning than those who walked along the beach. From our previous work (Wynveen et al. 2010), we understand this meaning to involve ways in which the attributes (e.g., abundance and diversity of fish; relatively calm waters; and underwater flora, fauna, and geological formations) of the setting facilitated the type of recreational activity that the individual participated in. Hence, we posit that the *facilitation of desired recreational activity* meaning was more important for anglers than walkers because the anglers' experience is much more dependent on specific attributes of the setting, such as abundance of desired fish species and water and weather conditions, whereas most walkers can accomplish their activity in a wider range of conditions or possibly not even at the beach adjacent to the GBRMP at all. More broadly, it is probable that the more dependent an activity is on a setting and the more immersed the individual must be in the setting to participate in the activity, the more likely it is that the individual's experiences will form memories that, in turn, lead to a place meaning regarding the importance of the setting to the facilitation of the desired recreational activity.

However, our original hypothesis suggested that more than just one of the meanings would have been assigned differing degrees of importance by the respondents. We believe that the lack of association between place meaning and activity type for the other nine meanings may be an artifact of measurement error. It is possible that our place meaning scale is not sensitive enough to identify differences between user groups. It is also possible that this is the only difference for anglers and beach walkers. Hence, if we had enough data to analyze other activity types, other meanings may also have been found to be significantly different. Future research should address the limitations of our study.

Lastly, our observations regarding the associations between place meaning, visitation frequency, and activity contribute to the growing body of literature surrounding the singularity of place meaning and place attachment (e.g., Smaldone et al. 2005, Wynveen et al. 2011). Specifically, given that place meaning and attachment have been observed to be related to (or even formed and maintained by) the same constructs, it is probable that place meaning and place attachment are two sides of the same coin. That is, the words an individual uses to describe the place meanings he/she ascribes to a setting reflect why a place is valued and the intensity of that value. Similarly, place attachment indicates the intensity of the human-place bond, but also abstractly addresses the value of the setting.

6.0 Conclusion

This investigation provided insight into the association between recreational activity type and place meaning. Doing so provided support for a hypothetical relationship that has been described in qualitative studies of place, but not empirically tested. We also found support for the importance of repeated visitation to place meaning. To fully understand these relationships, more research

needs to be conducted. We suggest studies designed to answer the following questions: How do different activity types influence different meanings? What aspects of the recreational experience contribute to place meaning formation? Can managers encourage different programs to encourage meanings and attachment that lead to other attitudes and behaviors? Answering these questions and others will provide us with a better understanding of how the values, thoughts, and beliefs recreational visitors ascribe to a setting are formed and maintained. This information may shed light on ways managers can engage different groups by creating a dialogue based on stakeholders' cognitions, emotions, and behaviors that form the basis of the meanings that they ascribe to protected areas.

7.0 Citations

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Table 1. Tests of effects on individual meanings

	Meaning	df	F	p
# of recreational visits	Curiosity and exploration	1	6.25	.01
	Facilitation of desired recreational activity	1	4.54	.03

	Escape from the everyday	1	6.22	.01
	Connection to the natural world	1	6.50	.01
Type of recreational activity	Curiosity and exploration	5	441.71	.90
	Facilitation of desired recreational activity	5	494.82	<.01
	Escape from the everyday	5	440.13	.34
	Connection to the natural world	5	243.05	.43

Table 2. Post hoc (estimated marginal means) for recreation meaning importance

Activity	Mean*	SD	F	p
Fishing	4.15	.80	12.87	< .01
Walking along the beach	3.56	1.06		

*Means based on a 5-point scale where: 1=Only slightly important; 3=Moderately important; and 5=Extremely important