

# Interferences in Place Attachment: Implications for Wilderness

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**Abstract**—Previous research on place attachment has tended to focus on attachment formation, with relatively little attention given to factors that disrupt or interfere with formed place attachments. Interferences to attachments are a worthy research area for two reasons: 1) The factors of place attachment are often more salient when being disrupted, and 2) place attachment interference often leads to great uproar, making it more salient to managers and decision-makers. Expansion of the place attachment concept that considers disruptions to attachments provides a more robust framework for examining visitor behavior.

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Place attachment is a concept that considers the emotive, affective elements involved in the person-place relationship (Tuan 1977). Many consider it to be an alternative framework to the more commonly used cognitive and rationally based research and decision tools, which follow the assumption that people make decisions rationally and in a linear fashion (Williams, 1989). In a similar manner, a number of growing issues in the management of wilderness point to the need for alternative frameworks for examining and managing visitor behavior. A specific example of the discord between visitor behavior and rationally based prediction models has been discussed in the satisfaction literature regarding the rational choice model. As suggested by Williams (1989), people do not maximize utility when making decisions about outdoor recreation, but instead muddle through the process. Developing a model that takes into account other influential elements of decision making, such as emotion and affect, would allow for a more holistic approach to wilderness management. Ideally, a more holistic approach would facilitate making decisions that more closely approximates the reality of motivations for many visitors.

Place attachment as a framework has the potential to be such a model and move researchers beyond what Williams and others (1992) described as the ‘commodity metaphor’ in wilderness research. The commodity metaphor suggests that the prevailing theoretical approach to research on outdoor recreation settings has been to focus on identifying the setting features necessary to support specific activities or desired experiences. Thus, much like consumer products, settings then become collections of features or attributes.

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The emphasis on manipulation and control of tangible properties of natural resources to meet recreation needs reduces recreational settings to an optimal combination of attributes for a given clientele (Williams and others 1992). While recreation research has made some gains using perspective, it has limitations. Resources are viewed as ‘backdrops’ for an experience, rather than an end or the ‘experience’ in itself (Williams 1989). Recreation settings are also viewed as interchangeable and even reproducible, as long as the alternative setting provides for the same desired attributes as the original setting. Place attachment challenges these views, choosing instead to emphasize the unique relationship that can develop between people and recreation settings.

## Review of Place Attachment

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Place attachment as a framework stems mainly from environmental psychology and geography and has been applied to recreation behavior with increasing frequency in the past decade. Before discussing its applications, it is worthwhile to take a brief look at the meaning of the term “place attachment.” Tuan (1977) defines place as space that has been given meaning; “what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.” Attachment used in this context can be defined as an affective relationship between people and the landscape that goes beyond cognition, preference or judgment (Riley 1992). Place attachment produces a state of psychological well-being experienced by a person as a result of the mere presence, vicinity or accessibility of the place (Mitrani 1997). Related concepts to place attachment that have also been seen in the literature include terms such as emotional investments (Hummon 1992) and emotional linkages to places (Hunter 1978).

In outdoor recreation research, place attachment is generally conceptualized as being comprised of two components: place dependence and place identity. Place dependence is “an occupant’s perceived strength of association between him or herself and specific places” (Shumaker and Taylor 1983). The strength of association between a person and a place is based on two things: the degree to which the place satisfies the needs and goals of an individual, and the availability of other settings to meet the needs of the individual (Shumaker & Taylor 1983). Clearly, a person will be more likely to develop a dependence on a place when it meets a number of his/her needs and goals, especially if there are few alternative locations available that can provide for those opportunities. While place dependence does involve awareness of a location’s unique and special qualities, those qualities are based on the functional and activity needs met at that place (Moore and Graefe 1994).

Place identity, the second component of place attachment, is more closely linked to the emotional and symbolic nature of person-place relationships. Proshansky and others (1983) introduced the notion of place identity as a fundamental sub concept of self-identity, suggesting that the processes operating between place and identity are the same as between groups and identity. More recently, Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) expanded Proshansky's concept, proposing that place identity is not a separate part of identity concerned with place, but that all aspects of identity have place-related implications to a greater or lesser extent. Place is considered an active part of the construction of a person's identity, representing continuity and change. For example, people use place identifications to distinguish themselves from others and as an opportunity to develop new identities. However, places also act as a referent to past selves and actions; place identities serve both as a way to distinguish difference yet maintain continuity of self.

Proshansky and others (1983) presented a number of assumptions of place identity that are particularly relevant to outdoor setting attachments. First, through personal attachment to geographic places, a person acquires a sense of belonging that gives meaning to his or her life. This sense of belonging is a function of the degree to which activities important to a person's life are centered in and around the geographic location. Second, this sense of 'centeredness' is an unselfconscious state, implying that its full meaning cannot be communicated. As a result, it is difficult to reduce or parcel out exactly how place identity and self-identity interact. Place identity is a complex structure characterized by attitudes, values, thoughts, beliefs, meanings and behaviors that are both cognitive and emotional.

## Characteristics of Attached Settings

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While it is difficult to predict exactly where and why individuals will develop attachments to places, some common themes have been found. Often viewed as a precursor to attachment formation is the right of an individual to occupy that space (Chawla 1992; Marcus 1992; Riley 1992). For instance, when an individual is not permitted to be in a space, such as within the context of private property, he/she generally will not form an attachment to it. Interestingly, what is more salient for place attachment is the right to be present rather than actual presence. In other words, attachments can form to places where a person may never set foot, as long as the individual perceives that a choice to enter that area.

Three other setting factors that favor attachments include the following: (a) freedom of action, (b) social interaction, and (c) setting continuity. Freedom to manipulate the surroundings to express oneself seems to favor attachment because it allows people to act in a self-determined way (Chawla 1992; Marcus 1992). Opportunities for social interaction in a place also favor attachment. It intuitively makes sense that attachments will form in places that provide for opportunities for coming together, fostering relationships, and celebrating and sharing experiences (Chawla 1992; Marcus 1992; Riley 1992). Finally, spaces that have an element of relative physical constancy and continuity are

more likely to foster attachment formation. When a setting remains in the same state as when the attachment was formed, it continues to serve as an anchor for self-identity and life experience.

## Wilderness and Place Attachment

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In a number of ways, wilderness, as defined by the 1964 Wilderness Act, appears to be an unlikely candidate for place attachment as discussed above. While the necessary precursor to attachment is met, as wilderness is a space that is open to the public, the restrictions placed on visitors to wilderness appear as inhibiting the formation of place attachment. First, legislation restricts the visitor from altering the environment in any substantial way. This seems antithetical to the idea of freedom of action. Second, one of the prime purposes of wilderness is to provide for solitude, which counters the premise of social interaction as a necessary component for attachment formation. Yet, people do develop attachments to places in wilderness. Perhaps, the reason lies in the development of attachments to wilderness because of its designation (Williams and others 1992). In other words, people develop attachments to the *concept* of wilderness, regardless of whether they have interacted with it at all.

There may be two explanations for the seemingly counterintuitive finding. First, wilderness as legislated is different than wilderness as experienced. For example, wilderness settings may not be as restrictive as they may first appear. Clearly, visitor restrictions limit actual physical manipulation of wilderness, such as chopping down trees or picking flowers. However, while manipulation of the physical wilderness setting is low, control of the visitor over the wilderness *experience* is extremely high. In contrast to numerous other settings, the level of societal control over an individual's experience is greatly reduced. Indeed, it is the role of wilderness to serve as an antithesis to civilization that is one its most highly touted values (Hendee, Stankey, and Lucas 1990; Knopf 1988; Nash 1977). As a place where societal and role constraints are low, visitors may perceive that they can control their experience (Samdahl, 1988). This freedom is expressed in numerous ways ranging from an individual's choice of route, of a place to camp, of when to stop and swim or read a book, or even of what to talk about around the campfire.

The concept of solitude in wilderness may also be something other than what it appears. While solitude is commonly defined as being alone, Hammitt and Rutlin (1997) have found that solitude means something different for different wilderness users. For most, the wilderness experience tends to be a social experience, as 97% to 98% of users go with others to wilderness areas. As Stankey (1989) suggests, rather than complete isolation from others, solitude seems to be more a matter of "being alone together" with members of one's group. It appears that people do desire social interaction in wilderness. The opportunity to be alone together is seen by numerous groups as an essential component to facilitate social interaction. Wilderness therapy groups, student orientation programs and wilderness trips

with integrated populations are three examples of common wilderness uses with social interaction as a main objective.

As previously mentioned, people form attachments to wilderness as a category of land designation (Williams and others 1992). To explain this finding, we look to passive use values of wilderness as a possible explanation. According to Loomis and others (1999), passive use values such as existence value (valuing wilderness because it land protected from development), option value (valuing wilderness for possible future visits), or bequest value (valuing wilderness for future generations) may be more important to people than the value of actual wilderness use. It is possible that attachments can form based on the meaning these values hold for a person. There are parallels to this phenomenon in the place attachment literature for places of a religious or historical significance such as churches and monuments. In these cases, the attached place is seen as a symbol of cultural significance and meaning, and people claimed they would feel a sense of loss in the case of its disappearance or destruction (Low 1992). It is possible that people view wilderness as a similar place of significance and meaning similar to those discussed by Low (1992). Thus for a wilderness user, attachment may develop from factors of both active and passive use.

## Implications of Place Attachment in Wilderness

Place attachment has three main implications in the wilderness context. First, it can be argued that visitors who are attached to the wilderness setting have a more meaningful wilderness experience. Rather than serving as a backdrop for an experience, wilderness becomes an integral component of the experience, adding another layer to the tapestry that comprises a recreation experience. Not only does this attachment contribute to the experience, it may also produce longer-lasting benefits (Walker and others 1996) and a more restorative experience (Korpela and Hartig 1996).

Second, while place attachment can enhance the wilderness experience, it can also play a role in the enduring nature of the experience. One effect is the fostering of an environmental preservation ethic. Some examples of this manifestation have been demonstrated by Chawla (1992), who found that a common thread among environmentalists was the development of an attachment to a natural setting in childhood. Similarly, Brandenburg and Carroll (1995) found that individuals who were attached to a wilderness area were more willing to make personal sacrifices that promoted the environmental protection of their place of attachment. Along with environmental awareness, personal values, and perceived control, Grob (1995) found that the intensity of emotion felt toward an environmental state was a significant predictor for environmental behavior.

Third, place attachment has potential applications as a tool to classify visitors. Indeed, there may be 'place-oriented' visitors, just as there are social or activity-oriented visitors. Place-oriented visitors, or visitors whose main motivation for visiting an area is to enjoy the place itself, have been found to have significantly higher levels of place attachment than either activity-focused or social-focused visitors (Williams and others 1992). Visitors with high levels of place

attachment have also been found to be more sensitive to ecological impacts at the site of the attachment, as well as to intrusions of sight, sound and other recreationists (Williams and others 1992).

## Expansion of Place Attachment Concept: Place Interference

While place attachment is a process in which people bond with places, place interference can be thought of as the converse or reversal of this process. Interference is the loss of the affective bond between a person and a place. Interferences result from noticeable changes in three aspects of the person-place relationship: the people, the process or the place (Brown and Perkins 1992). Examples in the wilderness setting include: loss of traveling companions due to changes in social situations such as death or divorce (people); loss of characteristics of the wilderness experience, such as safety or solitude (process); or loss of wilderness setting due to natural events or management policies (places). Just as with place attachment, attachment interference is holistic and multifaceted, and changes in people, processes, and place interact. For example, a management decision such as reducing group size, while intended to change the level of degradation of the "place," also clearly interacts with the "people" component of the experience. For people who feel large groups are an integral part of their wilderness experience, changes of this sort may be perceived as a negative interference.

While place attachments may develop slowly, interferences to attachment can take place quickly, with long-term effects (Brown and Perkins 1992). Person-place bonds change often and do not have the effects of a place interference, but the essential component seems to be a sense of personal control over the change. Not surprisingly, place interference is most prominent in situations where individuals with attachments have little or no control over the processes causing the interference.

Interferences to place attachments are important in the wilderness context for two reasons. First, interferences bring to the forefront the affective connection between people and places believed to exist on a day-to-day basis at a subconscious level (Proshansky and others 1983). Thus, interference can be a valuable research phenomenon for greater understanding of the processes of place attachment. Second, cases involving interferences to place attachment are most important to the wilderness manager, as these are the situations in which visitors will be most irate or distressed. Understanding the resulting effects of place interference, as well as the role that management plays in either minimizing or exacerbating interferences, is valuable information for managers.

Although individuals may react differently to interferences in place attachment, a number of principles of the effects of interferences can help guide understanding and management of place interferences in wilderness.

- 1) Interferences affect self-identity. To an individual, a loss of place attachment means a loss of a way to distinguish self from others and a loss of a way to relate to self in the past.
- 2) Interferences cause stress and a sense of loss or betrayal. In cases where interference happens rapidly, individuals

are threatened by a sense of overwhelming change. This loss is often experienced as grief. It is unclear what the outcome of this sense of loss may be. For some, it may lead to a loss of motivation for maintaining any sort of attachment with a place, and for others, it may lead to a desire to strengthen the attachment bond. Similar to the concept of psychological reactance, difference in these cases may be related to whether individuals believe they can make effective change to the interference.

3) The more sudden a change, the more difficulty there is in rebuilding attachments. For example, sudden natural disasters, incidents of crime or unanticipated management policy changes, due to the minimal foresight involved, may be more difficult to rebuild than changes implemented slowly or in increments.

4) While disruptions may be caused by isolated incidents, there may be societal trends that contribute to the likelihood of place interference. It is worth expanding on the notion that trends affect place attachments because there are a number that are actively altering attachments to places. The following is a brief list of those most salient to wilderness:

- **Rapid transformation of landscape:** We live in a society that has the ability to alter landscapes at an incredible rate. While we may perceive wilderness as being isolated from change, in many cases, wilderness is at high risk. In many parts of the country, lands bordering wilderness or wilderness itself are giving way to other land uses that often lead to great physical upheaval. Due to the lack of confidence people have that an area will maintain some form of landscape continuity, the benefits of forming attachments may not outweigh the sense of loss that these visitors expect when the landscape changes.
- **Introduction of technology into wilderness:** High-tech equipment, fabrics and gear in many ways insulate people from interaction with landscapes. While technology can make us more independent in the wilderness, it also separates us from the land in significant ways (Ewert and Shultis 1999). For example, our fabrics separate us from the 'elements,' so to speak, and our communication equipment maintains a link outside of the wilderness setting. As a result, the role of wilderness shifts closer to being a 'backdrop' for an experience.
- **Changes in wilderness user:** As we distance ourselves from interaction with landscapes, we move closer to becoming what Riley (1992) terms 'continual tourists.' Instead of developing relationships with landscapes we become collectors; we visit a setting, take pictures, then move on to the next setting. This trend seems to have extended to wilderness, as indicated by a decrease in the average length of wilderness visit over the last fifteen years (Watson, this proceedings). The leaning toward a more consumptive experience with this trend interferes with bond-making simply because there is less time spent immersed in a place.
- **Safety risks to users:** While wilderness often presents threats to safety from animals or natural causes, the perception that the real danger lies in encounters with other humans is growing. As crimes in wilderness

increase in frequency and in level of media attention, visitors will be less likely to put themselves in a position that fosters place attachment, or they will simply be unable to reach the level of affection toward the wilderness that is characteristic of place attachments.

Place attachments not only augment the wilderness experience, but also can have long-term benefits such as support for resource protection, and it is important to examine how interferences can be minimized.

## Management Strategies to Minimize Interferences to Place Attachment

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The principles of interferences to place attachment serve as guides for the creation of strategies to manage wilderness that minimize interferences. Clearly, in some cases, fulfilling the strategy completely may lead to unacceptable levels of environmental or social impacts. The intention of these strategies is not to promote resource degradation, but to provide a perspective for decision-making that could promote and maintain place attachments.

1) Maintain as much control over the experience as possible with the visitor. Since control is the key factor separating normal changes from those that become interferences, maintaining high levels of control with visitors over the wilderness experience should minimize interferences to place attachment. Manifestations of this strategy include including visitors with attachments to the wilderness in decision-making processes and allowing for high levels of self-determination during the wilderness experiences.

2) Implement changes gradually. Publicize decisions prior to their implementation, and implement decisions in stages as best as possible. This process will provide visitors with the time and opportunity to prepare for changes.

3) Be favorable to opportunities to reconcile loss. In situations where there has been a sudden change in the person-place bond, such as in cases of sudden crimes or natural events, ritual and ceremony can help for individuals to reconcile the loss. Special events such as 'Take back the Trails' can help people move beyond the grieving stage to accepting or even bonding anew with a place.

4) Examine management decisions holistically. Be aware of how decisions may affect attachment bonds in ways that are unanticipated or unintended. Examine how decisions may affect the person, process and place involved in the attachment bond.

Place attachment, while still in the exploratory stages, has the potential to serve as a viable framework to guide research and decision-making in wilderness. The main benefit of place attachment is its ability to refocus study of visitor behavior to include the emotional and affective connections between people and places that may be missed with traditional research frameworks. Understanding how place attachments are disrupted can help expand understanding of place attachment, as well as generate strategies to maximize attachments.

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