

Adventure Spaces: How We View Our Adventure Places

By Ryan Howard

But on my first excursion to the summit the whole mountain, down to its low swelling base, was smoothly laden with loose fresh snow, presenting a most glorious mass of winter mountain scenery, in the midst of which I scrambled and reveled or lay snugly snowbound, enjoying the fertile clouds and the snow-blooms in all their growing, drifting grandeur.

John Muir, in Edwin Way Teale's *The Wilderness World of John Muir* (2001, p. 252)

This short discussion explores the relevance and importance of place in adventure recreation and has evolved in part from an effort to understand the overwhelming influence of places on my own adventure experiences. While there is a depth of research and writing on both place and sense of place, this article highlights some practical notions that should induce further thought and reflection on the meaning of the spaces wherein we choose to recreate.

The preceding quote by John Muir paints a picture of the meaning found within a place through one person's experience. Muir describes this place with words and meanings that transcend simple descriptives: his words embody power, thought and emotion, giving the reader a sense of the tremendous influence that Muir must have felt in that very moment he described. Muir's feelings, like many we have all had through our own outdoor experiences, are evidence of a body of knowledge and experience that grapples with understanding the multitude of influences and outcomes our surroundings impart upon our lives. Encountering these feelings is a part (large or small) of all adventure recreation experiences.

Person and Place

To begin deconstructing places, it is important to differentiate between abstract space and meaningful place. This dichotomy illustrates that for place to be meaningful one must recognize it as such. Furthermore, a meaningful place must be organized in

a manner in which meaning can be found, while abstract space is either yet to be interpreted or devoid of influential meaning for a particular individual.

The question thus arises as to what makes a space meaningful. While there is no simple answer to this query, place and person-based characteristics help in illustrating the dimensionality of this question. Place characteristics generally include scale, size, physical characteristics, history (story), location and so on, while person-based characteristics often include length of residence, mobility, age, security, social aspects, value systems and so on.

It is equally important to consider that place characteristics exist in concentric levels, each with its own organization, meaning and influence. Consider place characteristics as similar to the concentric rings formed from the reaction to a pebble cast into a pond — as the rings move away from the centre (i.e., a specific place in which you find meaning) towards the outer rings (i.e., larger more diverse spaces) the scope of your initial point is engulfed by a much larger area. To put this analogy simply, specific meaningful places are a part of larger spaces that at each level embody some characteristics found within your specific meaningful place (Low & Altman, 1992; Relph, 1976). Why is this important to recognize? To start, it begins the process of acquiring skills to reflect on the characteristics (dimensions, location, and so on) embodied within a meaningful place, and further it allows for the description and

understanding of a meaningful place within its larger surroundings.

As an exercise, think of one place in which you find meaning. Build a concentric series of rings that grow outwards from that place. With each ring ask yourself, what are the similarities to your meaningful place, what are differences, and what does this tell you of the interconnectedness of finding meaning in places? This concept and these questions may lead you further towards finding the important (meaningful) characteristics of places to which you connect.

Place in Adventure

Integrating adventure experiences into this discussion finds us first confronting the separation of home versus not-home. Meaningful space is divided primarily between these two areas (Lewicka, 2011) with home being the place that constantly surrounds us and serves as a spatial anchor (Golledge & Stimson, 1997) upon which we base our experiences away from home. According to Porteous, home “is our major fixed reference point for structuring reality” (1976, p. 386). Is the contrast of our home an important factor in the construction of our attachment to our adventure and recreation places? Or does our home play a much more subtle role in directing us towards finding meaningful places?

Looking back through history, people were considerably place oriented within their daily lives. Currently, within many developed and modernized societies, there exists an expansion of our geographic horizons through increased mobility, abundant and available access to information and other globalization processes. With all this, how do people find and connect to meaningful places? Furthermore, how does the expansion of our geographic horizons influence our connection to the land and ultimately our attitudes towards the world around us? Are we as a society moving towards a more cosmopolitan way of existence and how do we find our way back to being connected to local places?

Experiences in the outdoors, either through adventure recreation or other means, may in part offer one solution to some of the preceding questions. Many of the characteristics of an adventure experience — such as risk, excitement, discovery, physical activity, and perseverance — all add their own importance and meaning onto the place(s) in which we “adventure.” With this statement I leave one question: Does the very nature of an adventure experience lead someone towards finding meaningful connections to place(s)?

References

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