

Private Property Rights versus Scenic Views: A Battle Over Place Attachments

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In the West, some of the most volatile political debates revolve around land-use issues. Much sociological research has focused on the relationship between length of residence and attitudes towards the environment, land-use and growth controls, but very little has investigated the relationship between place attachments and attitudes. Through depth interviews with 90 residents of Nevada County, California, I investigate the relationship between place attachments and attitudes toward local land-use issues. I develop a typology that illustrates the influence of attachments to place on attitudes towards land-use issues. This typology is illustrated through the discussion of local land-use issues.

Let's keep Nevada County beautiful for our children

Nevada County is such a unique place to live and raise children. We have small town charm and are a community who cares about the quality of life. This is evidenced by something we enjoy that is becoming increasingly rare - a living environment of natural beauty. Blessed with everything from open pastures to thickly wooded forests, spectacular views, ponds, meandering creeks, country roads and the river, we really do inhabit God's country. It is the peace and serenity of this rural atmosphere that drew most of us here.

Each time I venture down the hill, through Placer County, I'm impacted and saddened by new subdivisions, strip malls, more traffic and pavement and noise. Once a vision of pastoral delight, it has been replaced by greed and urban sprawl.

. . . Help to leave a legacy of mindful planning that keeps intact our rare treasure of natural and rural beauty, for our children and their children to enjoy.

Katie Walsh, The Grass Valley-Nevada City Union, February 15, 2000

Ms. Walsh's concern for protecting the quality of life in her community is shared by numerous other residents of Nevada County, California, as well as residents of countless other communities across the United States. One need not look far to find similar accounts of the strength of emotional attachments to place or the losses associated with population growth. Poets, journalists, essayists and citizens tell their stories and express their concerns for their communities in local papers, radio broadcasts, magazine articles, and entire books. Both the

volume of stories and variety of mediums in which they are told indicate that emotional bonds to places are significant aspects of our lives and identities.

In part, these disagreements are fueled by the highly emotional nature of the issue. Individuals form emotional attachments not only to the people in their communities, but also to the physical landscapes in which they live (Hiss 1990, Hummon 1992, Tuan 1974). Rapid growth disrupts both the physical and social landscapes by altering the built environment with new buildings and roads and the social environment with new residents and patterns of interaction. Change necessarily creates loss; as new buildings and social relationships emerge, old patterns and relationships are lost. It is the emotional costs associated with loss that set the stage for and color the debate about growth.

Past studies of population growth in rural communities have focused on relations between old-timers and newcomers, and political attitudes towards growth related issues, and many of those used length of residence and demographic characteristics as explanatory variables for attitudinal differences. In this paper I propose that place attachments are an important dynamic in responses to growth and should be considered as an explanatory variable when analyzing conflict between long-time residents and newcomers.

THE CLASH BETWEEN NEWCOMERS AND OLD-TIMERS

Since the 1970's social scientists have been especially concerned with the impacts of rapid growth on community cohesion and local politics and government (Israel & Wilkenson 1987, Sokolow 1981, Wellman & Marans 1983). Although the media and some researchers claim that there are significant political and value differences between newcomers and old-timers, many studies have found that attitudinal differences are due to socioeconomic differences including age, education, occupation and land ownership, rather than length of residence (Cockerham & Blevins 1977, Graber 1974, Sofranko 1980, Sokolow 1981, Smith & Krannich 2000). Those who have studied attitudinal differences between newcomers and old-timers have found small differences between the two groups regarding issues of environmental protection, zoning & planning, economic development, public services & infrastructure improvements, and growth controls (Sofranko et al. 1981, Smith & Krannich 2000, Weir 1974).

So, if newcomers and old-timers as groups don't have widely different political views, what accounts for media representations of conflict between the two groups, vicious letters to the editors, and highly factionalized local politics in rural counties which have experienced significant in-migration? Smith and Krannich argue that the media exaggerate conflict in order to sell stories, and that the perception of differences enhances conflict between members of the two groups. "Where this occurs, it hardly matters whether the attitude differences between the two groups are perceived or real, so long as people believe them to be real" (Smith & Krannich 2000). Unfortunately their study of attitudes does not include any data on conflict in the communities they study. While they are able to rule out attitudinal differences as the source of conflict, they do not actually explore the nature or degree of conflict in the communities they studied. Their paper leaves us still wondering about the significance of conflict between newcomers and long-time residents in rapidly growing rural communities.

Al Sokolow argues that lack of attitudinal differences does not imply a lack of local political conflict between the two groups. "Attitudinal surveys which report little variation in views of public issues according to length of residence seldom deal with actual political behavior. It is possible for a few articulate and aggressive newcomers to have a significant

impact on the direction of local government by raising issues, organizing, and defeating incumbent office-holders” (Sokolow 1981). Sokolow concludes that understanding the consequences of growth requires a deeper understanding of the interactions of people, issues and structures over time.

Such an understanding might, in part, result from the study of place attachments in rapidly growing communities. Social scientists from a variety of disciplines have documented the importance of place attachments to mental health and self-conception. Physical places are more than just the background for social life, they are an integral aspect of the self. Fried points out that “a sense of spatial identity is fundamental to human functioning” (1963). Individuals create place attachments to their homes, neighborhoods and communities (Belk 1992, Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981). Beyond a person’s home, individuals also form attachments to their neighborhood, community and region. Through interaction, people form physical, emotional and cognitive attachments to places which then become part and parcel of individual and group identities (Brown & Perkins 1992, Hummon 1992, Low and Altman 1992). I argue that these attachments are closely linked to political attitudes and help to explain conflicts between long-time residents and newcomers.

SETTING

Nevada County is in many ways an ideal location for the study of place attachments and community conflict. Located in the fastest growing region of the country¹, Nevada County and other “Gold Country²” counties have been among the most rapidly growing counties for decades (U.S. Census 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000). Located in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, these counties are desirable because of their amenities: mild climate, national forests, and ample opportunities for outdoor recreation. Proximity to the Sacramento area, the largest employment market near the foothills, also makes foothills counties desirable places of residence. Additionally, more and more people are able to make their homes in rural areas like Nevada County because of technology that allows individuals to telecommute and maintain their incomes while living further from their place of employment.

Residents of Nevada County include long-time residents whose families have lived in the county for generations as well as several different waves of newer migrants. New residents have been arriving at a rate of about 25,000 a decade for the last 30 years (U.S. Census 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000). In the 1970’s, back-to-landers in search of a simpler life moved to the foothills of western Nevada County and built their homes in the forest. In the 1980’s, retirees in search of the ideal retirement lifestyle flocked to two large gated communities and built their homes on golf courses and next to lakes. In the 1990’s, urban escapist in search of a higher quality of life moved to smaller towns and bought homes in Grass Valley and Nevada City or the countryside surrounding them. Since the 1970’s, Nevada County has been transformed from a predominantly rural region to an exurb of Sacramento and the San Francisco Bay Area.

METHODS

¹ Between 1990 and 2000, the West was the fastest growing region in the country (U.S. Census 2000).

² The region consisting of Nevada, Placer and El Dorado counties is commonly referred to as Gold Country by its residents. It is also referred to as Gold Country by Timothy Duane. 1999. Shaping the Sierra: Nature, Culture, and Conflict in the Changing West. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Data used in this paper were collected between 1994 and 2000 for a dissertation in Sociology at the University of California at Davis. The bulk of the data comes from intensive interviews with 90 residents of Nevada County, California. Most interviews were between one and a half and three hours. Because I wanted to learn about the experiences of residents throughout Nevada County, I interviewed people living in both towns (Grass Valley and Nevada City), and throughout the other residential areas of the county. In addition, I tried to ensure that my overall sample was appropriately balanced in terms of gender, race, class, and length of residence in the county, commuter status, and age. All names and nonessential biographical information has been changed to protect the confidentiality of interviewees.

Other sources of data include observational field notes and archival research. I took field notes in a variety of settings including: volunteering at a local museum; attending community events like the County Fair and other street fairs; attending city council and county board of supervisor meetings; hanging out in local cafes; and visiting with friends who live in the county. I used the local paper as well as other printed material as sources for public images of the community, political debates, and community issues. Useful materials included: political signs, informational flyers, tourist brochures, event guides, real estate bulletins, and the like. Additionally, I collected state and national census data to construct a demographic overview of the county from 1850 to the present.

UNCOMMON GROUND: THREATS OF GROWTH AND WHAT SHOULD BE PROTECTED

If Nevada County residents express very similar concerns over growth, and agree that new growth should be done with consideration to the local community, why does growth continue to be one of the most controversial topics in the community? I puzzled over this very question during all of my interviews. Some residents see growth as threatening their quality and way of life and seek to protection through the use of regulations that would place restrictions on land use and dictate standards for use and the aesthetic appearance of real property. Some examples of this include historic ordinances, designation of the Yuba River as Wild and Scenic, and a proposal to designate Highway 174 as a state Scenic Highway. In contrast, other residents strongly oppose such ordinances as an infringement of their personal property rights.

At first, I saw this as a simple debate between protecting the aesthetic quality of the local landscape versus limiting governmental control. After coding and analyzing my interviews and developing typologies of place attachment I have come to see these debates through a different lens (Cross 2001). Instead of seeing it as simply pro-regulation versus anti-regulation, I now see it as an expression of different relationships and attachments to place. To illustrate this argument, I will explore how people with different types of place attachments viewed the proposal to establish Highway 174 (a.k.a. Colfax Highway) as a state Scenic Highway.

PLACE ATTACHMENTS: RELATIONSHIPS TO PLACE

Place attachment, referred to by some as *sense of place*, can be thought of as affective bonds between people and places, which may include physical spaces as well as other people and even culture (Low and Altman 1992). Low and Altman emphasize the social aspect of place attachments, “places are, therefore, repositories and contexts with-in which interpersonal, community, and cultural relationships occur, and it is to those social relationships, not just to

place qua place, to which people are bonded” (1992). In my dissertation, I examined two separate aspects of place attachment, type of attachment, and level or degree of attachment (Cross 2001). For the purposes of this paper, I will only be examining one aspect, type of bond. In the following analysis, I will use the term *relationship to place* when discussing types of bonds between people and places, and the term *place attachment* to speak generally of emotional and other bonds between people and places.

Residents of Nevada County described different types of connections with place, which I have categorized into six types of relationships: biographical, spiritual, ideological, narrative, commodified, and dependent. This typology should be seen as ideal types, or analytic categories developed to facilitate understanding. The six types characterize what the people I interviewed describe as fundamental ways they relate to places. They should not be seen as descriptions of individual people. Many people are likely to have more than one relationship with a single place, and those relationships are likely to change over time. Regarding the level of analysis, people have relationships to places as small as a favorite rock next to the river, or as large as a geographical region. My primary endeavor is to describe relationships and attachments to the place people think of as their “home territory”, which may be a house, neighborhood, town, or region. Table 1 outlines the six types of bonds and the processes through which they develop.

TABLE 1 Relationships to Place

Relationship	Type of Bond	Process
Biographical	historical and familial	being born in and living in a place, develops over time
Spiritual	emotional, intangible	feeling a sense of belonging, simply felt rather than created
Ideological	moral and ethical	living according moral guidelines for human responsibility to place, guidelines may be religious or secular
Narrative	mythical	learning about a place through stories, including: creation myths, family histories, political accounts, and fictional accounts
Commodified	cognitive (based on choice and desirability)	choosing a place based a list of desirable traits and lifestyle preferences, comparison of actual places with ideal
Dependent	material	constrained by lack of choice, dependency on another person or economic opportunity

To illustrate these types, I have selected the following quotes, which capture the basic essence of each type of relationship to place:

Biographical

“I built two houses there and bought my third. I have basically lived there half of my life, and you know, it is home. This place is just home, more than LA ever was. Although I am comfortable in big cities, this is just home. . . The San Juan Ridge is so much a part of my identity.”

Spiritual

“I think it is beyond kind of an intellectual understanding, my attachment to this place. And it is not even emotional... **This** is the place that I belong. This is where I feel at home... That is why I say psychically, it’s just like there is not a differentiation of myself and place, in a way... This is me, this place is me.”

Ideological

“There are number of scales of criteria for a person to be home in a place. First of all is a wish to. That is not as trivial as it might sound. It is, the acknowledgement of the place as a place. The wish to know it, rather than seeing a piece of landscape or piece of real estate as just that--real estate (ranching, farming, logging). It is the difference between having a relationship with a person who you treat as a prostitute or as a wife. Place is relationships.”

Narrative

“We learn about place through the stories we hear. The stories our grandparents tell us. The stories we tell our children. They become a part of us and our place.”

Commodified

“It was the whole package that drew us, the lake, golf course, tennis. It is a good elevation. The gates did offer prestige and security. But it was the total package... I think what we have is more of what we want than other places. It’s not like we haven’t looked around. We lived in the North East, there is nothing there, and there is nothing in Southern California.”

Dependent

“I came here because of him. And he did select this area based on a geographical search of an area that had the things that he was looking for. For where he was going to live and selected this area and then found employment here after the fact. So, I mean, he physically selected this area, and he dragged me here kicking and screaming.”

Each relationship to place can be characterized by the type of bond people experience with place and the value of place itself. Place holds a different value in each type of relationship. Population growth, growth controls, and policies regulating land use pose different threats to each type of relationship to place. Associated with each potential threat is a potential loss (Table 2).

Table 2 Potential Threats to Place Attachments (Relationships to Place)

Relationship	Value of Place	Potential Threat	Potential Loss
<i>Biographical</i>	home, personal history, and identity	increased governmental regulations	control over one's property
	community identity	uncontrolled growth	change in the character of place
<i>Spiritual</i>	sense of belonging and connection to the earth and cosmos	uncontrolled growth	loss of spiritual belonging and renewal
		destruction of natural places	
<i>Ideological</i>	moral ethical obligations to place	growth and development not aligned with the value of stewardship	destruction of biological and human communities
	valued for itself, beyond human uses and desires		
<i>Commodified</i>	desirable amenities	uncontrolled growth	destruction of amenities
<i>Dependent</i>	employment	uncontrolled growth	loss of employment
	personal wealth	increased governmental regulations	loss of land, resources or restricted use

These relationships to place and the threats posed by various initiatives can be easily seen in local political debates. Three relationships to place (biographical, commodified and dependent) most obviously appear in the discussions surrounding Hwy. 174's scenic designation.

HIGHWAY 174 (COLFAX HIGHWAY)

Highway 174 is a two-lane road that connects Grass Valley with the town of Colfax, thus the name Colfax Highway. Interstate 80 runs through Colfax, making Highway 174 a practical route for traveling from Grass Valley to Sacramento or Reno. This stretch of road is 13 miles long and winds around hills, orchards, forests, and passes through two small communities, Peardale and Chicago Park. The Colfax Highway Association, a community organization, had gotten Highway 174 onto the state eligibility list for Scenic Highway designation. In spring of 1999, the Nevada County Board of Supervisor's considered a proposal to designate Hwy. 174 as state Scenic Highway. The proposal was dropped by the Board of Supervisors following an informational meeting where property rights advocates expressed strong opposition.

Arguments for a Scenic Highway focus on protecting the scenic beauty and preventing development from destroying the rural character of the area. These arguments mirror the intentions expressed by Cal Trans and are consistent with some biographical and commodified relationships to place. Those people who have lived in the area long enough to strongly identify with the local community have developed a biographical relationship to the place. Because of their community identity, they are invested in seeing the rural character of the area maintained. For them, regulations, either in the form of strict zoning ordinances or scenic highway

designation offer protection from uncontrolled growth that would dramatically change the character of their place. One woman, who grew up in the area and bought a few acres on the highway after retirement, cares about protecting her community:

I want the scenic highway for very selfish reasons, because I live right on it. It has deteriorated in the last 20 years. I don't want to see any more. People used to care for their property, now they have junky cars, broken down trucks and garbage. One neighbor had bags of garbage out in front. I don't want to see our highway turn into another Highway 49 (heavy commercial development). It would keep people from painting their house hot pink, keep out wrecking yards, keep businesses from putting up tons of signs, and limit growth to certain areas.

Although some of these concerns are about aesthetics (paint colors, junk in yards) her overall concern is about protecting her community, which includes protecting natural beauty and limiting commercialism.

Also in favor of scenic highway designation are people who value the rural character of the place but don't have a long personal history or strong community identity. Many of these people are newcomers who value the rural qualities of the county and settled in Nevada County because them. To these people, ruralness is an amenity, which defines the value of place. Without those amenities, the place would be less desirable. As a man who has lived in the county for ten years describes:

There are a whole cadre of folks like me who have moved up from the Silicon Valley. I came here because I didn't want to drive on straight roads with no trees. It was the rural quality that drew me and I want it to stay that way. As the county is becoming more and more populated, more people move here for the rural quality.

This concern for protecting natural amenities is consistent with a commodified relationship to place, where protecting the aesthetic amenities is a top priority. In places where scenic views are primarily on private lands, governmental restrictions offer to protect and maintain aesthetic beauty.

In contrast, arguments against the scenic highway focus on negative aspects of governmental restrictions. Among those with the strongest opposition are people who have both a biographical and dependent relationship to place. Many of them are landowners who make their living off their land. For them, the land is part of their personal and family history, a source of income, their only retirement wealth, and an integral aspect of their identity. To these people, regulations pose a threat to their livelihood as well as their sense of control over their home. This view is eloquently described by a man whose family has owned land in Nevada County for generations:

For me, this is home. I have lived all my life in this place. I have agonized over hangin' on to it. I have paid my taxes. I have been involved with the community. Now to have people come and let people tell me that I can't build a fence to keep people out. I have to let wildlife come through my property. These people have absolutely no stake in it. They come from a background of never having owned

anything besides a city lot. They have never woken to see their crops frozen. They have never met these kind of emergencies. They have faced others.

For people living on family farms or ranches regulations pose a triple threat. First, they pose a threat to one's home. The desire to prevent others from regulating what a person can do on their own property is a natural extension of protecting one's home. Control over one's property is one of the defining aspects of home (Seamon 1979). Without the ability to control access and do you as one pleases, the security and peace offered by one's home is threatened. Secondly, they pose a threat to one's history and identity. Homes and other places are repositories of our history, identity, and relationships with others (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981, Low and Altman 1992). Thirdly, they pose a threat to a person's livelihood. When a person's land is their home, their source of employment, and their retirement wealth, regulations have the potential to destroy a person's quality of life, their ability to support their family, and their ability to retire.

I seldom heard this argument for property rights from people who do not make a living off their land. Most of the opponents of property rights are homeowners who do not rely on the income generating capacity of their real estate. While homeowners are interested in protecting their property value, without the concern for income generating activities, aesthetics take precedence over property rights. Commodified relationships are characterized by choice, the choice and financial ability to settle in a desirable place. After choosing an ideal community, it seems reasonable that they would support ordinances that would maintain the qualities of place that attracted them to move, namely aesthetic beauty and rural atmosphere. They are in essence trying to protect their future home. Just as some many old-timers see regulations as a threat to their home, many newcomers see lack of regulations and uncontrolled growth as a threat to their potential future home.

CONCLUSION

This data suggests that place attachments may provide explanatory power for understanding political conflict in the presence of attitudinal similarities between newcomers and old-timers. My interviews suggest that Nevada County residents cannot agree on a method because they have very different relationships to place and therefore, very different ideas about what is threatened by growth and what is in need of protection. Residents who relate to place primarily as a commodity to be consumed will likely continue to argue for the preservation of those amenities they see as valuable. Residents with deep biographical roots and economic dependency on their land will likely fight against any proposed regulation that will limit their ability to use their land as they see fit. Residents with deep biographical roots will support policies they see as protecting their community. And, residents who feel a deeper spiritual connections and ethical responsibility to place will seek ways to protect and preserve the natural world for its own sake.

Additionally, this data suggests that a lack of a common language about the significance of relationships to place prevents fruitful discussions. Many of the arguments I heard about local political issues reveal the significance of place attachments, but few people spoke with clarity and well-developed language about the importance of place attachments in their lives. Without common understandings of the various relationships to place, individuals do not have the ability to articulate the real issues at stake or the knowledge to understand their neighbor's concerns.

As a result, conflicts between newcomers and old-timers may be escalated not only by the lack of common experiences and place attachments, but also by the inability to articulate the essence of their concerns. Without common language to describe place attachments and their significance, a person's intimate, familial, historical, and economic connections to land are reduced to a simplistic discussion of property rights. Debates about the importance of protecting property rights typically lack a discussion of the significance of a person's property to their identity and sense of belonging. Perhaps knowledge of and language to discuss place attachments would allow newcomers and old-timers to identify both their differences and commonalities, and lead to more meaningful discussions of political issues.

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