

Learning and change in rural regions:
understanding influences on sense of place.

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I declare this thesis is entirely my own original work.

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Abstract

This thesis is about how people develop attachments to places, and what this means for natural resource management. The concept of ‘sense of place’ is generating strong interest in the domain of natural resource management. In particular, the concept offers considerable potential as a way of integrating social, ecological and economic dimensions of environment. This makes the concept highly relevant to an emerging agenda from a range of disciplines and management approaches concerned with the links between social systems and natural systems at local and regional scales (Berkes and Folke 1998; Cheng Kruger and Daniels 2003; Plumwood 2002).

Recent interest in place has led to a research agenda for exploring how this concept can play a greater role in resource management (Cantrill and Senecah 2001). Central to this research agenda are questions of how attachments to places are influenced and how sense of place changes over time. In response to the emerging role of sense of place in natural resource management and the research agenda for exploring this concept, this thesis is concerned with three questions: what are the key influences on sense of place?; what is the relationship between sense of place and activities in practice?; and how do people learn about places and respond to change? To explore these questions, the thesis presents findings from interviews with 40 participants in case studies of the Atherton Tablelands and Woodstock, north Queensland. The research employed a purposeful sampling design with the aim of capturing as many different senses of place as possible within the limits of this study. Participants represented a broad range of land uses,

ethnic backgrounds, ages and durations of time in the place of the interview. The data from these interviews were analysed using qualitative methods drawing on grounded theory (Charmanz 2000) and influenced by adaptive theory (Layder 1998). The research included a focus on honouring human experience (Braud and Anderson 1998), and also recognising the importance of prior research on how people develop a sense of place (Piaget 1971; Relph 1976).

The analysis showed how sense of place was influenced strongly by childhood experiences, both for people who grew up in the case study locations and for people who grew up elsewhere. Other strong influences on place involved living in a similar environment overseas, seeking profit and having a sense of self focussed on agricultural production. Of particular interest is that for many participants who moved to the case study locations, their sense of the Atherton Tablelands or Woodstock was well developed prior to arriving there. This implies that influencing people's sense of place once they have arrived in a new place will be difficult. Attempts to influence people's sense of place before they arrive, or soon after arrival, are more likely to be successful.

The ways that sense of place related to practice are presented as a series of overlapping themes. These include the practice of admiring one's place from the comfort of home, making the land produce, and engaging with a place through activities such as hunting, camping and fishing. Participants also described the practice of caring for place, such as looking after traditional country and restoring the family farm.

The ways participants learned about their places focussed on their childhood experiences, learning from elders, the role of comparisons between places, and the

importance of continuity of experience. Participants described very few ways of learning about their place during adulthood. One of these was seeing places under different conditions, such as during a rat plague or after a bushfire. Another was through involvement in community events such as festivals.

In discussing the implications of these findings for natural resource management and policy, the thesis highlights how for several participants the key influences on sense of place were tied to non-economic values. Furthermore, this thesis shows that for many people identity and place were strongly linked and this adds to research that explains why farmers may not behave in economically 'rational' ways (Botterill 2001a). The thesis also discusses the links between sense of place and post-productivist values in considering transitions in regional Australia identified by Holmes (2002). The findings of this thesis emphasise the potential role for environmental education during childhood to encourage learning about places. The thesis also discusses the implications of how people learn about their places during adulthood, arguing that further support for festivals and community events can play a significant role in exploring the links between social and ecological systems.

In conclusion, the thesis argues that the concept of place continues to offer considerable potential for understanding change in regional Australia, and in particular a grass roots shift towards post-productivist values. This role can be developed by further supporting environmental education in childhood and community events such as festivals which help us to learn about the links between ourselves and our environments.

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