

Revealing sense of place through analysis of interpretive messages in forest settings

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Schama (1995: 61) wrote that “Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock.” The cultural and symbolic qualities of landscapes are elaborated in public discourses, including those presented in environmental interpretation, described by Ham (1993: 5) as: “Any communication process designed to reveal meanings and relationships of our natural and cultural heritage to various publics...” Though researchers often study the effects of *exposure to* interpretive messages on the attitudes and knowledge of visitors to resource places, issues related to the *production* of messages are equally important.

Written and visual interpretive texts are produced by resource managers and also by tourism and community promoters. Managers and others who provide interpretive information about forested landscapes aim to educate citizens and visitors about natural resources and also to convey the historical importance of forests, raise interest in nature, teach appropriate outdoor behaviour, promote conservation ethics, and stimulate people’s senses of place about a place or region and its resources. Collectively, these communications use language, symbolism, and imagery to create imaginative experiences for visitors. Interpretive messages can be seen as strategic, persuasive communication efforts, intended to influence how people think about and value (both symbolically and tangibly) forested landscapes.

The research described here studies how Vermont’s forests and forested landscapes are discursively presented in interpretive materials created by outdoor recreation and tourism providers. Because many visitors to forest resource areas access printed interpretive materials on-site or at visitor centres, this analysis focuses specifically on paper-based publications and on-site signage. (Another aspect of the study focuses on internet-based interpretive materials, but these are not addressed in this paper.) The overall goal of the study is to explain the discursive processes associated with presenting interpretive messages that elaborate senses of place in forested landscapes of Vermont.

Background

The concept of *sense of place* has been of increasing interest to recreation and tourism scholars (Kianicka et al. 2006; Stokowski 2002). Recent qualitative research studies sense of place as the socially-constructed meanings made visible in interpersonal interaction and public discourse. As Tuan (1991: 694) noted, “Public places...are made and sustained by language...the visibility and viability of places...rests on the quality of human speech.” That is, people encounter places in social relationships sustained by conversation – so, a discourse approach to sense of place has theoretical and practical importance in revealing how social actors (resource management agencies, communities, tourism businesses) communicate meaningfully about places.

Methods

We identified public, private and non-profit agencies and organizations involved in forest recreation and tourism in central Vermont. Bisected by major highways, this region also includes notable public lands and tourist destinations such as the Green Mountain National Forest, Marsh-Billings Rockefeller National Historic Park, state and town forests, and private and non-profit land management sites, including ski resorts. In summer and fall 2013, we collected printed interpretive materials (brochures, flyers) and took photographs of texts (signs at exhibits, trails, and museums) at forest recreation sites. Using iterative readings, we evaluated and categorized the texts according to their interpretive qualities: (1) primarily interpretive texts; (2) materials combining informative and interpretive texts; these were further subdivided by their relative emphasis; (3) primarily informational texts; and (4) general publicity materials beyond the scope of the project. Categories (1) and (2) are the focus of this study.

Data analysis began with an initial content analysis of textual materials, followed by qualitative methods (rhetorical, narrative, and semiotic discourse analyses) to study how forests and forested landscapes are discursively portrayed. This involved close readings and assessments of the claims and warrants made in texts, the nature of narratives, and evaluation of symbolic images used in the written materials. Message forms, styles, and themes were compared across agencies and activity settings, as possible, to illustrate discursive differences across management authorities. We are now developing propositions about the form, content, and styles of sense of place discourses presented by resource managers.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is on-going, but preliminary results suggest that only a relatively small proportion of collected paper-based materials can be considered fully “interpretive” according to standards used in the literature of environmental interpretation. Many texts are primarily informational, or mix interpretive and informational material. Interpretive texts differed from less interpretive texts in their contents (linking between past/present; using a problem/solution format); in their form (the level of detail presented; whether the text tells a story; the nature of photographs); and in styles used (interpretive texts were more personal). Surprisingly, the forest itself was often given little attention, even in texts where it was central to the stories told.

Conclusions

This research is relevant for public, private and non-profit organizations that support forest education and interpretation programs. Written messages about forests and landscapes are strategic, persuasive communication efforts, and sense of place values in forests are the basis for public and private actions related to forest management, including protection of ecosystem services and long-

term planning for forest resiliency. In assessing discursive strategies used by recreation and tourism providers in constructing interpretive texts, the study described here can contribute practical suggestions for improving interpretive messages to help reveal the meanings of place intended by managers for visitors to their resource places.

References

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