Making 'sensible' places: normative considerations in the management of protected areas

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Over the past four decades myriad place concepts has found their way into scientific research and popular discourse for managing outdoor recreation sites and other protected areas. Underlying these various place concepts is a range of normative ideals for prescribing or adjudicating among different conceptions of good or "sensible" place-making. Unfortunately, many who advocate for creating, maintaining, or restoring some particular (normative) sense of place have often justified their views without much recognition of the diversity of positions (both descriptive and normative) associated with the label "sense of place" (e. g., Beatley & Manning 1997). Looking across a wide range of disciplines and discourses, however, one can find at least three major prescriptive (normative, political) ideals for guiding "sensible" place-making. This paper evaluates three sets of norms for guiding protected area management: place as *bios*, place as *ethnos*, and place as *demos* to argue for a more pluralist conception of sensible place-making.

First, place as *bios* builds on the idea that environmental degradation is to an important degree the result of a lost, forgotten, or atrophied sense of place. This line of argument is particularly evident in the philosophy of bioregionalism which asserts that economic, social, and political life can be more sustainably organized around "authentic" natural regions through the cultivation of decentralized, self-sufficient, and self-governing communities (Thayer 2003). Greater alignment between political and ecological boundaries is seen as a way to foster a return to the practice of living-in-place, learning to re-inhabit or become native to a place. Thayer (2003, p. 6) writes that the "recognition of a life-place, or bioregion [means] the acceptance of the need for us all to reassemble the world by integrating the natural dimensions of each of its various regions with a deepening sense that we inhabit a specific place." Rejecting economic globalization, bioregionalism seeks to restore a presumed authentic biocentric (natural) way of acting and dwelling in the world by reestablishing a closer linkage between ecological processes and cultural practices.

Second, building on a communitarian political philosophy, the idea of place as *ethnos* refers to shared ways of life, identities, and parochial attachments (Entrikin 1999). Communitarian social movements seek to strengthen local solidarities and shared histories and identities through commitment to a common set of values, norms, and meanings that define social differences and boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Just as bioregionalism tends to revere the local as a way to enhance ecological sustainability, communitarians defend the virtues of the local on the basis of their presumed thicker ties of tradition and custom as the basis for political unity. Applied to politics, Kemmis (1990, p. 122) has argued for a communitarian style of local governance that depends less on a set of procedures, regulations, and bureaucracies and more on local patterns of relationships and human virtues conceived as "a set of practices, which enables a common inhabiting of a place." As an antidote to the homogenizing tendencies of globalization, communitarians regard human fulfilment and social order as necessitating the kinds of secure attachments and moral frameworks that local communities presumably offer. The normative ideals of both *bios* and *ethnos* stand in stark contrast to the once prevailing view that regarded the local as a site of injustice and emancipatory struggle. Specifically, equating sustainable places to maintaining a local sense of place, bioregion, or community has been heavily criticized for valorising "authentic" nature and local cultures and traditions over more open and egalitarian democratic principles (Entrikin 1999).

Third, in the face of such criticism some geographers have proposed the idea of place as *demos* – characterized as a progressive, cosmopolitan or global sense of place – as the basis for a "political commons" in an increasingly globalized world dominated by plurality and difference. Massey (1993), for example, argues that real places often lack the singular, coherent qualities often attributed to bioregional or communitarian senses of place and instead host plural identities, which are the source of both richness and conflict. This more dynamic, plural, and relational view has the capacity to honour the human need for authenticity and rootedness while recognizing that such sentiment need not become an exclusive enclave. Framed as *demos* good places require an egalitarian ethos built on a cosmopolitan conception of place that is both "rooted in the concreteness of everyday experience and practice" and at the same time open to a world beyond the local and supportive of universal ideals of "a common humanity striving to make the earth into a better home" (Entrikin 1999, p. 280).

Reconciling the different norms used to guide the management of protected areas is not just a matter of identifying place meanings and attachments, it is also a question of the establishing the appropriate social processes and institutional arrangements by which society evaluates and adjudicates among competing senses of a place. From a critical pluralist perspective there is no "correct" set of norms to guide place-making (Williams 2013). As personal ideals or lifestyle models bioregionalism and communitarianism have much to recommend, but as political projects they deliberately empower some stakeholders more than others. The challenge for governing protected areas is how to draw strength from these different norms for adjudicating values and meanings. On the one hand, the different perspectives need to be out in the open, widely acknowledged, and respected for what they are – competing conceptions of the good. On the other hand, a vibrant democratic process does not require (and may be undermined) by adopting bioregional norms of authentic dwelling or by insisting on local ties of tradition and custom as the basis of a functioning polity as communitarians suppose. Rather what is needed is a capacity for shared learning – learning to co-exist in a shared space even if people share little else – a capacity buoyed but not bounded by geographic proximity and economic interdependence. Thus while a critical pluralist acknowledges and values different norms, the cosmopolitan norms of *demos* encourages a collaborative form of protected area governance through participatory social learning and pragmatic place-making.

References

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