Sharing stories of place to foster social learning

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Abstract. Place research underscores a need for social learning. Social learning about place is appropriate in a preparatory phase prior to initiating a formal planning process. Doing so enables land-use planners to begin public dialogue at a point that appreciates landscapes and builds a positive base to grow relationships among stakeholders. Sharing stories of place allows emotions to come to the surface and become known. Planning processes have traditionally avoided explicit inclusion of emotion, and have excluded any knowledge that comes from their public expression. Emotions are best understood when they are shown through a living of the emotions at the moment of representation. Sharing stories about place requires social scientists and planners to expand the traditional roles of their craft to include a showing of emotions. Several scholars have recommended the need to create dialogue forums that encourage the representation of emotions within working relationships. The following challenges are explored within "learning circles" in three different land-use planning contexts: (1) Stakeholder forums need to be structured in ways that allow participants to feel safe and comfortable sharing stories about place; (2) Stakeholder forums need to value emotional expression regarding people's attachment to places; and (3) Stakeholder forums need to recognize that sharing place meanings holds promise to create new public values for a landscape.

Place research underscores a need for social learning. Place research recognizes complexity in place meanings (Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2004; Manzo, 2005; Williams, Patterson, Roggenbuck, & Watson, 1992), the potential for conflict amongst stakeholders (Measham & Baker, 2005), and need to create new public values for places (Kruger & Shannon, 2000; Schusler, Decker, & Pfeffer, 2003). The implications of place research often point to dialogic planning processes that allow place meanings, values, and emotions to be shared amongst stakeholders.

Over the past few decades, trends in land-use planning have moved in the direction of processes that sustain dialogue among various kinds of stakeholders (Daniels & Walker, 2001; Selin & Chavez, 1995). However, not all land-use planning forums are conducive to social learning. Some are counter-productive to building constructive dialogue (Parson & Clark, 1995;

Sarewitz, 2004). Many are framed as public involvement or participatory planning events during which agencies garner viewpoints from stakeholders (Germain, Floyd, & Stehman, 2001). Rather than embedding decisions in a learning process, many public involvement strategies are one-way in their communication flow and result in stakeholders reaffirming their understandings of the issues and reinforcing stereotypes of each other (Blahna & Yonts-Shepard, 1989; Gramling & Freudenburg, 1994; Keen, Brown, & Dyball, 2005). Although several strategies for social learning have been explored, there are still needs to continue these efforts and directly link learning objectives to shared meanings and emotions of place (Friedman, 1984; Stokowski, 2008).

The practical relevancy of this chapter is directed at a preparatory phase prior to initiating a formal planning process. Social learning about place is appropriate in a pre-planning phase and has modest aims: (1) *to begin public dialogue at a point that appreciates landscapes, and (2) to build a positive base to grow relationships among stakeholders*. Planning often begins in negative ways by directing attention to problem identification, scoping, inviting reaction to a preferred alternative, or some other point of alarmed discovery (Germain et al., 2001). These are conflict-ridden points to begin a planning process, and encourage stakeholders to formulate their positions and create boundaries amongst each other.

Social learning should be considered in cases where multiple values and place meanings may appear incompatible, and where agency staff want to build relationships with (and among) stakeholders (Schusler et al., 2003). Social learning involves simple acts of publicly representing one's sense of place and listening to others (Parson & Clark, 1995; Schusler et al., 2003). Through these acts of representation, a dialogue is developed that creates new public values and

ways to understand the issues at hand – this is the crux of social learning (Keen, Brown, & Dyball, 2005). The social learning that comes from sharing stories about place is not about reaching consensus nor resolving differences; rather it is about understanding place meanings of oneself and others, and opening opportunities for new meanings to emerge. Creating dialogic relationships amongst stakeholders with potential for new public values has not been a traditional function of planning yet is vital for effective implementation (Blahna & Yonts-Shepard, 1989).

Stories about place are narratives that connect people to their environments. The sense of time developed in narratives is critical to understand relationships between people and places (Cronon, 1992), and such relationships are best represented through stories of one's lived experience (Stewart, 2008). By reflecting a sense of time passing, emotional attachments to place have potential to be represented in ways that are understood by others. Several researchers have argued that story-telling is a natural way for people to organize their experiences, emotions, and values into meaningful wholes (Glover, 2003; Polkinghorne, 1988), and suggest that landscape planning processes could be facilitated through strategies that invite people to share stories about place (Kruger & Shannon, 2000; Fine, 2002; Richardson, 1990).

This chapter characterizes social learning as essential for place-based planning. The recognition of environments as places to which people form emotional attachments is at the center of place-based planning (Stokowski, this volume; Williams, this volume). The first half of this chapter identifies some major challenges that must be addressed in the development of strategies for stakeholder involvement in decision-making. The last half of this chapter addresses these challenges by exploring a strategy for social learning applied in three different landscape planning contexts.

Emotions about place

A goal of sharing stories about place is to provide a positive starting point for planning. The sharing of stories of place allows emotions to come to the surface and become known. Emotions and the knowledge that goes with them, although sometimes discussed as an important part of land-use decisions (Manzo, 2003; Kennedy & Vining, 2007), are rarely given a forum for expression. Planning processes generally try to avoid inclusion of emotional representation, and in doing so, neglect knowledge that comes from their public expression. Emotions are often cast as irrational, unscientific, hard to understand, and ultimately irrelevant to land-use decision-making (Davidson-Hunt & O'Flaherty, 2007; Hull, 1990). As a consequence, emotions emerging in public decision-making contexts are not formally anticipated, often perceived as negative (e.g., anger, frustration, sadness), viewed as counter-productive to dialogue, and being such, usually work to alienate stakeholders from each other. Social learning through the sharing of place meanings is a strategy designed to introduce emotions as important knowledge for planning. Sharing stories about place uniquely explains a person or community and their relationship to an environment (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2002, pp. 98-101). Initiating a planning process whose stakeholders have already shared place meanings allows dialogue to grow from a base of positive emotions (Gratton & Goshal, 2002).

Sense of place is about people and relationships with their environments. Such relationships usually are connected with various emotions and feelings, often referred to as place attachment (Kyle, et al., 2004). There has been an impressive accumulation of research directed at place attachment, and invariably it has assessed the *strength of the attachment* rather than the

4

emotion behind the attachment (Bricker & Kerstetter, 2000; Stedman, 2003; Williams, et al., 1992). Social learning about place recognizes the importance of emotions in our relationships with places, and allows a face-to-face representation of place attachment in ways that other methods are unable to facilitate. Without representation of emotions, a critical part of our relationships to place is missing.

Emotions are best understood when they are shown rather than told. A *telling of emotions* is a summary or some abstracted representation of emotions. Social scientists, and others in positions to represent a third party, often tell about emotions felt by participants in their studies (Denzin, 1985). People who tell of emotions are in roles of being "objective" or "neutral" to the emotions. Audiences of a telling receive the information but are not changed by the telling. A *showing of emotions* is a living of the emotions at the moment of representation. Audiences of a showing feel the impact of the emotions and experience a reaction to the emotions – people are changed by a showing of emotions (Denzin, 2001). Roles for social scientists traditionally are to represent, provide summary statistics, and otherwise objectively characterize people who have been studied. Such studies reflect a *telling of emotions*. Although there are some exceptions, most social scientists do not facilitate a showing of emotions as part of their research, nor are they comfortable in roles where they participate and become emotionally influenced by those whom they study. Sharing stories about place requires social scientists and planners to expand their traditional roles to facilitate stakeholders sharing place meanings, and in doing so, represent place attachments that include a showing of emotions (Barkley, this volume; Olstad, this volume).

The flipside of showing emotions is to feel the impact of emotions when they are represented. Witnessing emotions usually results in immediate changes in one's experience, and aligns with Walkerden's (2005) discussion of "felt knowing." He argues that western traditions have privileged logical reasoning at the expense of other senses of feeling, intuition, and personal experience. Walkerden characterizes felt knowledge as originating from felt meaning and essential to work through complex situations requiring collaboration and innovation (pp. 175-180; see also Gendlin, 1997; Schroeder, this volume). In his work on social learning in coastal zone management, Walkerden (2005) indicates that felt meaning is about "making sense together – embracing learning within a social context, and specifically embracing dialogue" (p. 179). He claims that when we de-center ourselves from disciplinary and professional ways of knowing – effectively detaching ourselves from anything deemed logically fundamental – we open to new ways of referencing knowledge and exploring felt meanings with one another (Schroeder, this volume). For Walkerden, felt meaning within contexts of public dialogue needs to claim space within planning processes that historically have been debilitated by technical rationality. Although felt meaning is derived from a literature stream distinct from emotional attachment to place, it provides insight to frame feelings and emotions in terms of wisdom.

Public Dialogue about Place

A dialogue is a special form of communication. It is not just people talking to one another and informing each of their own perspective. It is a way of communicating between people as meaningfully as possible and results in the creation of something new together (Bohm, 1996, pp. 2-3). The back-and-forth of dialogue is where people articulate their thoughts and

respond in attempts to clarify, challenge, empathize, or embrace the ideas growing among participants in the dialogue. There are often differences between intentions of representation and that which gets represented; there are also differences between the listeners who receive the information and the intentions of the speaker. In a dialogue, differences between that which was said, intended, and received becomes reconciled, and participants invariably see something new that connects the viewpoints of the dialogue. A dialogue is not simply representing one's view to make known information already known to the person. A dialogue is about two or more people making something new together – something they share in common – by talking and listening to one another.

Unlike many public hearings and other traditional forums for public involvement that are framed in adversarial ways, a dialogue is about representation of one's viewpoint. Creating dialogue forums that lead to new public meanings about place provides a promising starting point for formal planning processes. Fisher and Ury (1981, pp. 41-57) have argued that public dialogue should focus on interests of stakeholders in which they represent their motives and values, in contrast to promoting their political positions. In advocating the need for new strategies of public involvement, Ison (1995) claims that a dialogue is about thinking together. Unlike a discussion or debate, where sides are formed and the focus is on persuasion and gaining favor, a dialogue is where participants represent their perspectives and jointly create new meanings (Bohm, 1996; see also Bitzer, 1968; Stokowski, 2002).

By viewing dialogue as a "free flow of meaning" among people, Patterson et al. (2002) developed strategies to create new public meanings (in their words, to expand the pool of shared meanings, pp. 21-25). They indicate that people enter a dialogue with their own set of thoughts

and emotions that comprise personal meanings. During dialogue, thoughts and emotions are expressed, and meaning becomes shared or owned by those in the dialogue. In other words, meaning moves from being personal to being shared. As the pool of shared meaning grows, so too does a group's synergy and ability to make decisions for themselves.   Patterson et al. (2002) recognize the difficulties of building group synergy (in their words, a group's IQ), and claim that a key element of doing so is "to develop the tools that make it safe for us to …. come to a shared pool of meaning" (p. 25). They understand that successful public dialogue requires conditions that allow participants to share stories in ways that freely express thoughts, meanings, and emotions.

To improve the creativity and culture of organizations, Gratton and Ghoshal (2002) argue that the quality of dialogue is at the heart of any strategy for improving the dynamics of collaboration and working together. They recognize the "denial" of emotions in workplace discourse and the privileged position of technical rationality in traditional managerial decision-making (p. 214). They found organizations that enable explicit representation of emotions within decision-making contexts are the most successful and efficient in their functioning. Gratton and Ghoshal (2002) indicate that people are more creative and productive when emotions are freely expressed, and form stronger relationships through dialogue that brings-out feelings and emotions. Their recommendations are to build conditions that encourage emotional expression within working relationships, and ultimately, to enhance the capacity to make good decisions.

Social Learning about Place

Social learning engages people to share their perspectives, to develop a common framework, and to value their collective experience as a basis for action (Daniels & Walker, 1996; Keen, Brown, & Dyball, 2005; Korten, 1981; Schusler, Decker, & Pfeffer, 2003). Daniels and Walker (2001, pp. 4-8) assert that land managers are in positions to lead processes for social learning. They argue persuasively that social learning is essential to the formation of new public values to address the increasing complexity of environmental decision-making (Reich, 1985; Yankelovich, 1991). Social learning about place is a first step in any planning process for people to see environments as places (Measham & Baker, 2005; Williams & Stewart, 1998).

It seems like a platitude to assert that environments are places. We take for granted the places of our lives, and most people understand that environments are connected with senses of place. However there are some powerful forces that run counter to such a claim and often prevent planning processes from treating environments as places. Firstly, the long-standing privilege of science in environmental decision-making is already well-known as a force that searches for generalizable knowledge and universal truths (Allen & Gould, 1986; Fisher, 2000; Irwin, 1995; Yaffee, 1994). If one views an environment as an exemplar of some scientific principle, its uniqueness is seen in comparison with other environments that embody a similar set of scientific facts and processes. Sarewitz (2004) argues that scientific knowledge has traditionally held a central role in environmental controversies because of a "shared view of science as a disinterested force that could guide political decision making by providing appropriate facts – so long as it was kept separate from politics" (p. 388). He observes that scientific facts are not detached from human values, even though people on all sides of controversies validate their value preferences based upon an alleged body of facts (p. 397).

9

Sarewitz (2004) concludes his provocative essay by suggesting that environmental controversies are overly "scientized" because environmental values and place meanings are concealed by most planning processes. In an ironic twist, he claims that scientific narratives have become the primary means in which values surface within environmental controversies.

Secondly, land management agencies each have a culture and history of policy-making that influence decisions in systematic ways. From mission statements to agency policy to on-the-ground implementation, agency forces understandably push for consistency and alignment with precedence rather than uniqueness of locale or exception to a rule (Twight, 1983; Vining & Ebreo, 1991). The significance of agency cultural bias has spawned a literature stream exploring the impacts of professional bias on decision-making (Clarke & McCool, 1996; Foresta, 1984; Jasanoff, 1990; Priscoli & Wolf, 2009). At times, agency culture and professional bias may work against recognizing environments as places, and instead frame issues as challenges to agency policy.

Thirdly, agencies and their environments have a history of decision-making involving various special interest groups and stakeholders. To gain favorable outcomes of decisions, stakeholders learn to work the system in their best interests (Yaffee, 1994). In varying degrees, interest groups and stakeholders use scientific expertise and agency policy precedence to argue their positions and frame their cases (Sarewitz, 2004). It is not unusual for special interest groups and stakeholders to adopt the language and logic of scientists and agency staff, and in doing so, treat environments as battlegrounds for national ideological conflicts while neglecting the representation of their own place meanings (Barkley, this volume; Gottleib, 1993; Nie, 2003).

In short, there are forces that influence the major players in environmental decision-making – experts, agency staff, and stakeholders – that do not recognize environments as places. The result is that a significant portion of stakeholders have learned to work together in ways that avoid seeing environments as places. No doubt it is easy to claim environments are places, but in the practice of decision-making, there is unwitting resistance to this claim.

When environments are viewed as places, people and communities become part of the place. Sharing stories of place necessarily involves stories of people and communities. Through human actions and thoughts, an environment becomes attributed with meanings. Although a story of place is ostensibly directed at a specific environment, it is as much about the person whose story is being shared. Western society generally views aboriginal people as being intimately tied to their land and as holding deep-seated place meanings. Measham and Baker (2005) counter this point by arguing that all cultures believe "wisdom sits in places" whether they know it or not (a reference to Basso's work with Apache Indians, 1996). They urge environmental planners to prioritize the representation and negotiation of place meanings as central to environmental decision-making (Measham & Baker, 2005, pp. 96-101). At the crux of place-based management is a dialogue process that engages stakeholders to learn about meanings and emotions of place (Keen, Brown, & Dyball, 2005, pp. 6-18), with the implication that civic discovery and self discovery are two sides of the same coin.

The ideas in the above discussion translate to challenges for the practice of land-use planning. They indicate the need for strategies to foster social learning, which in itself is not a new observation to make. However the above ideas provide sensitivity to some of the conditions for social learning, and further suggest that stakeholder forums need to address the following

11

three challenges: (1) To be structured in ways that allow participants to feel safe and

comfortable sharing stories about place; (2) To value emotional expression regarding people's

attachment to places; and (3) To recognize that sharing place meanings creates new public values

for a landscape. Fortunately strategies for environmental decision-making have expanded in the

past few decades, and there are planning frameworks that hold promise to address the above

challenges (Brandenburg & Carroll, 1995; Davidson-Hunt & O'Flaherty, 2007; Ison, 2005;

Schusler, Decker, & Pfeffer, 2003; Selin & Chavez, 1995; Walkerden, 2005).

The second part of this chapter draws on examples from three sites in which stakeholders

shared stories of place. The studies explored photo elicitation as a technique to engage

stakeholders in a two phase process starting with their self-reflection and personal sense of place,

and a second phase as a stakeholder forum for sharing stories of place (referred to as a learning

circle). This strategy has been developed and applied in the following three land-use planning

contexts of Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie (a USDA administered site near Chicago,

Illinois), Grand Canyon National Park (a world heritage site administered by the NPS in

northwestern Arizona), and Urbana Park District (a municipal park district in a mid-size urban

area of central Illinois). The purpose of introducing this strategy is to illustrate the above three

challenges and provide examples of a way in which they could be addressed. An overview of the

methods is presented here (for further background see Glover, 2003; Glover, Stewart, &

Gladdys, 2008; Johnson, Glover, & Stewart, 2008; Stewart, Larkin & Leibert, 2004; Stewart,

Barkley, Kerins, Gladdys, & Glover, 2007).

A Strategy to Share Stories of Place

Eliciting Stories about Place

All three sites were either in their initial stage of planning or had not yet formally embarked on a planning process. Stakeholders were recruited as study participants, and identified through their participation in previous land-use planning processes or were accessed onsite at agency-based public events. Agency personnel were also recruited to be study participants. Resulting groups of study participants were a mixture of citizen-stakeholders, representatives from various interest groups, and agency personnel. The number of participants varied from 15 to 25 across the three locations. Disposable cameras were distributed to participants. They were asked to take pictures of special places in and around the study sites that were important to their life.

The use of participants' photographs was instrumental in facilitating conversations that elicited place meanings and landscape values through the telling of lived experiences. The first phase of the process coupled participant photography with conversations focused on photographs, referred to as an *autodriven photo elicitation conversation* (APEC). The APEC is particularly suited for research that requires a telling of deep-seated personal experience due to its capacity to equalize power between researcher and participant. The APEC is centered on the life experiences of participants; they choose places to photograph, and they co-construct meanings for these places during conversations with researchers. During the conversation, the researcher is in a listening mode albeit prompting participants to discuss the significance of places they photographed. The capacity of APEC to center itself on the life experiences of participants is a virtue of the method and contrasts with traditional social science techniques.

The photographs provided conversational structure during the APEC. As such, meaning was situated in the text of the conversation and not in the photograph itself. Photographs served as a site for the embodiment of memory and were the means by which their experiences in places were narrated. Conversation about the photograph served as an interaction through which meaning of the lived experience was constructed. During the telling of their lived experiences, stakeholders came to some understanding of their place meanings. From the APEC and the follow-up with researchers regarding review of transcripts and modifications to their narratives about places, stakeholders deliberated with their own set of place meanings. They were invited to the next phase that functioned like a group APEC, referred to as a "learning circle."

Learning Circles

In preparation for the second phase, stakeholders were asked to identify two or three photographs from which they could share their place meanings with others. Their photographs were projected onto a screen during their presentation. Discussions were tape-recorded and transcribed to allow for a review of the dialogue. As a final task, stakeholders were asked to reflect on the discussion. They wrote their thoughts and reactions on a notepad at the learning circles. The discussion of these examples explores a strategy to foster social learning about place.

Feeling safe sharing stories about place. The learning circles, coupled with use of stakeholders' photographs, focused attention on landscapes not people. Stakeholders viewed each other's pictures and considered place meanings, rather than thought critically about the stakeholder doing the talking. When individuals talked about their places, attention was directed

14

at the place rather than at the person doing the talking. Stated differently, we are each experts on our lived experiences in the places of our lives. To enable people to share these lived experiences with others, the structure of the dialogue forum needs to shift the "spotlight" away from the person and towards the environment. With such a shift, people are likely to feel safe and comfortable sharing their stories of place.

As an indicator of this focus of attention on places, stakeholders often introduced themselves in reference to their place meanings. For example, several stakeholders began their discussion by explaining reasons for living where they do, or visiting certain places; these reasons were directly related to their place meanings. Others introduced themselves with details on their personal environmental history that gave comparison points to understand their place meanings. These meanings often connected with deeply held values about their family history including appreciation for their parents and grandparents, their sense of national identity and cultural pride, or their personal or family-based land ethic.

With a focus on place, attention was deflected away from the speaker and quite literally toward an image of the place as projected onto a screen. Stakeholders' stories supported concepts of "place identity" and "topophilia," which generally assert that people construct deep personal relationships with environments (Williams, this volume). The stories of stakeholders described their personal relationships for the places they had come to know. The discussions were seemingly not about themselves or their ideological beliefs but about the places of their lives. Because of the perception that this discussion was about places and not about themselves as individuals, the conversations about place meanings unfolded with ease.

As part of deflecting attention away from individuals to places, the truth-claims of stories were not given to debate or questioning. Because each stakeholder had undergone the same process of taking photographs and having conversations about the importance of their places, the stories and visual images were received as genuine, and the sharing of stories had become a familiar task that was easy to produce. For example in a final reflection, one stakeholder wrote "I really don't like public speaking, but talking about something I know about and love helps me to become a better speaker." Another wrote "Sharing memories of places is as good as any ice breaker." From both the transcripts of the learning circles and the final reflections written on the notepads, the findings suggest stakeholders felt safe and comfortable sharing their stories of place. There were not any questions about the accuracy of the stories, the credibility of the speakers, or the genuineness of place meanings and emotional attachments.

Building contexts to represent emotional attachment to place. Describing special places was often told as a personal history of a stakeholder's association with an environment, and it fostered a re-living of the experience in a place. With all eyes focused on a visual image of the place, a showing of emotions came naturally to most stakeholders. Sharing personal histories were important contexts for emotional attachments to be known and understood, and as a consequence, were deeply felt by stakeholders. The use of photographs was essential for stakeholders to reflect on their place meanings, and to build a social context to show emotional attachments to place.

The use of photographs was instrumental in creating a shared memory that fostered empathy for speakers. In sharing their stories, stakeholders were re-living their experiences in the place (Denzin, 1985). The visual image became emotionally laden due to the emotions that

16

surfaced in the story. The visual image became a shared symbol that brought the group into the

same emotional sphere as the speaker (Harper, 2000), and led to recognition of joint caring–

even though there were implicit differences in political agendas across participants in the circle.

In each of the learning circles there were moments of silence as speakers and participants held

back tears or choked-up, there were flashes of spontaneous smiles, and there were examples of

collective curiosity as place histories were constructed. The emotions that surfaced, particularly

those that led to eyes welling-up with tears, were generally associated with family connections to

place and the potential for their disruption. When memories of one's ancestors or expectations

for one's children were shared, the emotional attachments were palpable.

Stakeholders did not plan to show emotions or become involved with each other as part

of their anticipation for the learning circles. The emotions were authentic and the collective

empathy that emerged was sincere. The shared emotions created an intimacy among

stakeholders that could not have been replicated through traditional planning processes, and

established a basis for trust. As written on the notepad by one stakeholder, "[I] learned we all

have the same values…[even though] a lot of the pictures were different but it seemed to bring

us together as a group."

Creating new public values for place. Several of the stories of place explained current

conditions by characterizing a place history. The intentions of such stories were often to enhance

the ability of others to interpret the landscape. Several stakeholders' stories of place addressed

questions about "Why has a place become the way it is?" In essence, they were telling others

about their way to read the landscape. By telling place histories to others, stakeholders shared

rationales for ways in which a place came into being. Conversations often led to additional

17

layers of meaning to explain current conditions, and a more complex place history was created compared to the initial story told. The spirit of such discussions was framed as teaching, with intentions to enlighten others about reading, and possibly appreciating, the landscape. Additional layers of meanings of place history were invariably received as adding value, and there were no examples in which the dialogue became competitive or adversarial about expanding a single truth into a more complicated version of place history.

Stakeholders' comments on their notepads indicated that new meanings were created for several places. One stakeholder wrote "It was neat to hear about other people's perceptions and histories. This has helped me to see some of the places differently." Another wrote "The next time I go to [a specific wooded area], I will think of Frances [pseudonym] and her sisters collecting walnuts with her grandmother. I didn't even know there were walnut trees growing there." The personalized contexts of the stories were easily understood by participants to the point where several participants changed their place meanings, or will "see some of the places differently."

With the inclusion of agency personnel as stakeholders in the learning circles, it was clear that agency staff members hold a diverse set of stories and do not embrace a singular sense of place. Public perceptions during traditional planning processes may simplify agencies and their staff into a uniform mould (i.e., *the* Park Service or *the* Forest Service) and fail to understand the complexity of agency decision-making and staff orientation to the landscape (Freudenburg & Gramling, 1994). For example, stakeholders from the Grand Canyon staff spoke about the toils of constructing trails, appreciation for sublime nature, teaching student groups about natural history, and patriotic meanings of a landscape. Viewing agency staff as fellow stakeholders and

18

understanding their collective diversity is a first step toward redefining a territory. Likewise,

learning the place meanings of other stakeholders led to seeing them in a different light

(Schusler, Decker, & Pfeffer, 2003). An important part of creating new public values for a place

is to see decision-makers and other stakeholders from a new perspective.

During the learning circles, differences between place meanings were generally non-

threatening and easy to understand. Dialogue about commonalities and differences among

stakeholders in the learning circles appeared smooth and progressed without the anxiety and

tension reflective of traditional forums of public involvement – such as public hearings or

planning workshops. The written comments on the notepad from one stakeholder stated "I

learned that I am more of preservationist than I ever realized I am. I also learned that thinking

about the future as well as the past is very important to me." As an example of understanding

differences, and its potential for social learning, some staff of Midewin learned about differences

in various goals for ecological restoration. Where agency directives were generally focused on

restoring an historic prairie landscape devoid of any signs of human development, stakeholders

appreciated place meanings of a contemporary prairie that included vestiges of the various eras

of humanity that had passed through the Midewin landscape. By opening-up the vision for

ecological restoration of Midewin, participants shared and took ownership in the nuance to a new

public value for the prairie (Stewart, Larkin & Leibert, 2004; Stewart et al., 2007). By comparing

their place meanings, the dialogue allowed stakeholders to discover both themselves and others,

with the discoveries leading to the creation of shared values for places.

Conclusions

19

The effectiveness of the learning circles is their capacity to frame environments as places. All stakeholders in the learning circles became more aware of their own place meanings during the research process. *A first step in place-based planning is to recognize that people need assistance in knowing their own place meanings.* Western culture does not encourage individuals to reflect on their own sense of place, nor does it support collective deliberation about a community's sense of place. The photo elicitation technique legitimized environments as places. In the learning circles, stakeholders became comfortable sharing their place meanings and learning about others. The start of place-based planning is to have built groundwork that centers dialogue on place meanings.

The learning circles shifted dialogue from stakeholder-planner to stakeholder-stakeholder relationships, where agency staff members were part of the mix of stakeholders. The shift has many consequences that hold promise for innovative discussion to support new pubic values for place, including creating a safe and comfortable space for sharing stories and emotional attachments of place. The dialogue of the learning circles was about sharing with fellow stakeholders not about speaking to authority. Because the format of the learning circles felt safe, emotions emerged and participants were open to learning about place meanings.

Public speaking was noticeably easy for participants, in part, because they were talking about their places, not about themselves. Because of this, differences were viewed not between people but between various ways to care about a place. Tension that could align with inter-personal differences was neutralized. Values for landscapes were expressed as part of one's lived experience of place, including the teaching of landscape history, and were not abstracted in some ideological or adversarial relationship. The learning circles underscored the extent to which

all stakeholders cared deeply about their places. The widespread feeling of caring for environments left a collective sense of appreciation for multiple ways to value them, and was reflected in the openness of the conversations to find compatibility across place histories.

Learning circles function to create a positive dialogue among stakeholders prior to beginning the formal steps of a planning process. Germain et al. (2001) indicate that stakeholders should be engaged early in any planning process in order to have a stake in the outcome rather than being reactive to some proposed action. They recommend the development of a "pre-NEPA" public involvement strategy that allows stakeholders to be proactive in planning. Although Germain et al. (2001) are focused on procedural issues, they suggest that a structured stakeholder dialogue will alleviate conflict and lead to improved outcomes. This chapter asserts place meanings as being the focus for a public involvement strategy prior to the start of formal planning, and characterizes learning circles as providing a foundation for stakeholders to build upon in subsequent planning processes.

Photo elicitation and learning circles are not meant for every land-use planning process. The nature of the strategy requires intimacy and commitment for individuals to endure the process. The study contexts were limited to 25 stakeholders, which for many land-use decision processes would exclude some interested parties. There are several points of contact necessary to facilitate the distribution of cameras, the interview, the transcripts and their revisions, and coordination of a learning circle. Some stakeholders may view it as burdensome. If the number of participants is greater than 25, there could be a loss of intimacy in the learning circles. This strategy for social learning is best framed as applicable to a defined set of stakeholders rather than a frame for general public involvement.

There are many other strategies for dialogue in which stakeholders would feel safe and comfortable sharing their stories about place. Photo elicitation coupled with learning circles is characterized as one such strategy. The primary factor to evaluate any strategy is that they need to foster discussion about place in order for place-based planning to take root. Coordinating a discussion about place does not come naturally for most agency staff, experts, and stakeholders. Simpler to say than do, any strategy for place-based planning needs to structure stakeholder dialogue to focus on environments as places.

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