

Compassionate Senses of Place: Reflections from the River

By Deb Schrader

On the summer solstice of June 2010, a time of constant Arctic light, 14 conference delegates gathered in Yellowknife to fly further north past the tree line, and to a lake downstream of the frozen headwaters of the Mara River. We unloaded colourful piles of canoes, food and gear barrels and daypacks, waved goodbye to the pilots, marvelled in the music of the lake ice crystals amidst pure quiet, and then got to work building boats, sorting gear, setting camp and cooking supper. My senses opened quickly to the locale as I tried to make meaning in this alien landscape. Distant rocks shifted into barren ground caribou, lingering grizzly scent caught my nose, hillsides radiated Arctic lupine blue, and flowering Labrador tea perfumed my sleep. Appreciation was acknowledged. Maybe it was day three when we reminded ourselves of the academic nature of this trip, once the simply consumptive life on a river—eating, paddling, meeting each other and packing up—felt routine. And so we began to present papers and move in further conversation both in and out of canoes for many days.

My own presentation explored sense of place. Basso (1996) considers that sense of place is a “commonplace occurrence . . . an ordinary way of engaging one’s surroundings and finding them significant” (p. 83). It is both an individual and collective relationship between landscape and people, a nebulous combining of senses and knowledge with place character. This exploration was prompted by my own sense of place that I have with the Rocky Mountains. The relationship is beyond rational as I am most often a visitor in that place. I “come from” the prairies. And yet it persists, mingling emotion and knowing and being.

On the canoe trip conference, I asked my fellow travellers this:

1. Do you have a sense of place? If so, how would you describe it? Could you tell a story that captures it?



2. How does your sense of place shape or contribute to your teaching practice?

Each person answered thoughtfully, some tear-filled, some pragmatic, some connected to research interests and most referred to childhood experiences—special times and people.

“I have a sense of connection.”

“Nature is my real home. I never feel strange in a nature environment and the meaning of the place I interpret through plants, animals and birds.”

“My deepest connections to places are through the people I was with.”

“Anytime I go to this sort of place I feel comfortable, instantly.”

“A coming home feeling.”

“I smell—I’m home.”

"I have a deep emotional contact with that place—its part of me, really under my skin."

"I've been made by that landscape."

The responses describe a great and silent power between self, others and the Earth, as the places we inhabit and the stories we tell about them inform, shape and connect us. The romance and reality of our conference group in that place—the caribou, muskox, bear and wolf encounters, our "aleness," the long days, the unique understandings of different people, the abundance—explored and expressed growing a sense of place from the ordinary into the significant. Rilke once wrote, I live my life in widening circles. Nurturing one's sense of place could seem to widen the circle of human compassion, connecting to others and to Earthly systems. My own circles continue to be expanded

and shaped by the story of a conference on a river, of people and place.

Reference

Basso, K. (1996). Wisdom sits in places. In S. Feld and K. Basso (Eds.), *Senses of place*. (pp. 53–90). Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.

Deb Schrader is completing her PhD at the University of Alberta concerning food systems and sustainability.

