

# Remembering the Roots of Place Meanings for Place-Based Outdoor Education

By Garrett Hutson

*By acknowledging such links between the inner, psychological world and the perceptual terrain that surrounds us, we begin to turn inside out, loosening the psyche from its confinement within a strictly human sphere, freeing sentience to return to the sensible world that contains us.*

—Abram, 1996, p. 262

## Introduction

Place-based education seeks to connect learners to local environments through a variety of strategies that increase environmental awareness and connectedness to particular parts of the world (Sobel, 2004). The concept of place meanings encompasses the subjective ways people construct meaning through their experiences with an array of settings (Gustafson, 2001; Manzo, 2005). Place meanings are personal, often with a human focus, and are open to interpretation, while place-based education tends to be framed more concretely within the particulars of local environments. In this article, I will argue that these two concepts can work together to broaden thinking around “place” as it relates to outdoor education pedagogy (Cosgriff, 2008). The purpose of this paper is to promote the utilization of place meanings within approaches to place-based outdoor education by (1) revisiting some of the conceptual and historical underpinnings of place-based education and place meanings to show similarities and differences between the concepts and (2) presenting a synthesis of place meanings within place-based theory to inspire a useful approach to doing place-based outdoor education.

## Place-Based Education: A New Localism

Place-based education has been referred to as being part of a “new localism” (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008, p. xii) movement within globalized societies in response to aspects of the modern world that break down the building and sustaining of local communities

and landscapes. Place-based sentiments do not necessarily reject a capitalistic society or practices; instead, they seek to honour the past, and enhance current and future community life. Additionally, place-based educational strategies aim to more intentionally incorporate all aspects of education into community life. Place-based educational theorists seek to re-vision all educational practices with a focus on the needs of local communities/environments as a primary educational objective at all levels of schooling (2008). Overall, for the purposes of this paper, place-based education can be thought of as a “community-based effort to reconnect the process of education, enculturation, and human development to the well-being of community life” (2008, p. xvi). This definition of place-based education encompasses the importance of a new localism while highlighting education as a means to create and sustain vibrant and healthy communities. Outdoor educators are in a unique position to help achieve some of these place-based goals.

For instance, place-based education has been described as a necessary precursor to solving modern social and environmental challenges (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). Specifically, Gruenewald and Smith suggested that in order to address these challenges, people must globally resist

ideas and forces that allow for the privileging of some people and the oppression of others—human and other than-human. At other times, place consciousness means learning how to reinhabit our communities and regions in ways that allow for sustainable relationships now and in the long run. (p. ix)

The focus of this paper is on the latter, through addressing the possibility of helping others learn how to reinhabit place by combining place-based educational ideals

with place meanings in order to explore how sustainable person-place relationships might be more explicitly nurtured in outdoor education contexts.

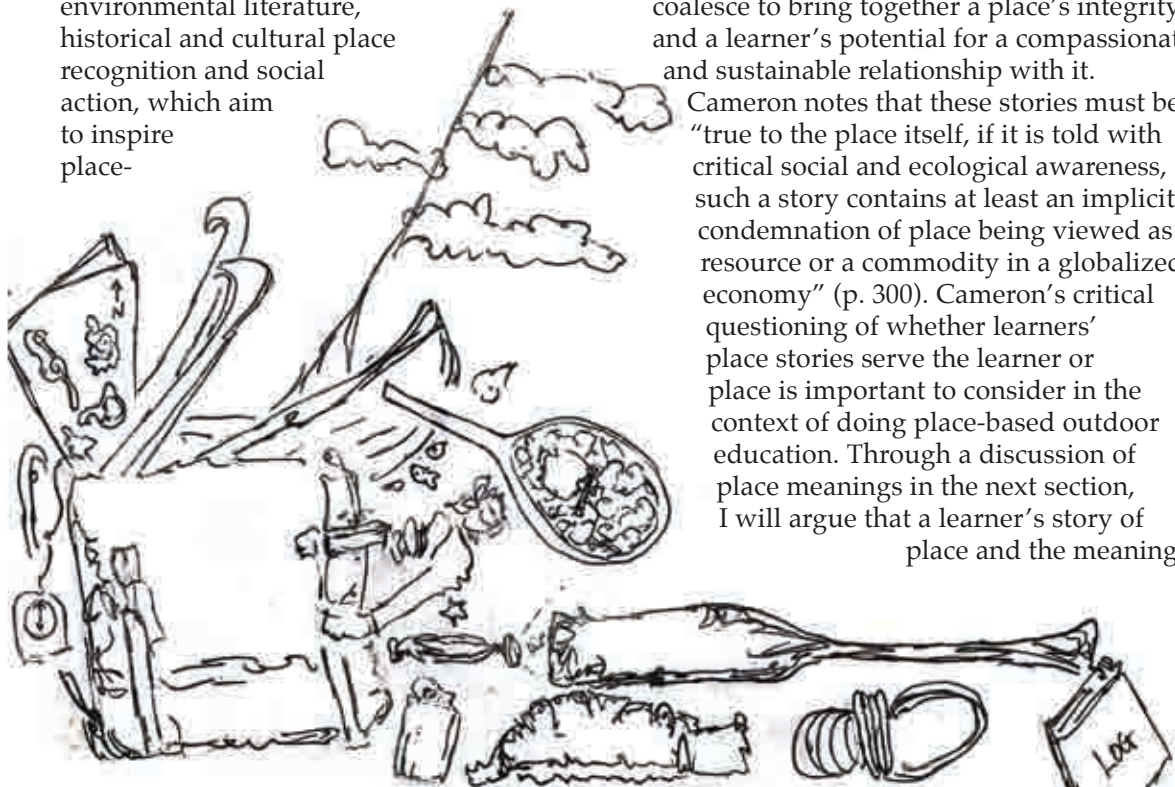
Gruenewald and Smith (2008, p. xix) posed important questions about how to do place-based education, including: "What educational forms promote care for places? What does it take to conserve, restore, and create ways of being that serve people and places? What does it take to transform those ways of being that harm people and places?" As I will argue later, place meanings have the potential to answer some of these questions. At the heart of place-based education is the theme of commitment to a community/region, its history and its future. Ideally, approaches to place-based education address each of these elements in a way that honours the needs of people and community (including the biotic community) as one entity in a reciprocal relationship between people and a place (Orr, 1992).

Many other educators have successfully utilized place-based ideals in practice. Cameron (2003) brings together student field experiences with critical thinking, environmental literature, historical and cultural place recognition and social action, which aim to inspire place-

based educational ideals. In Australia, Cameron (2008) teaches university students to be aware of the places around them in conjunction with their own thought processes and responses to those locations. He supports learners in their own human-centred development and responsiveness while honouring the authenticity of the place, its processes, history, features and problems.

Furthermore, Cameron (2008) facilitates place-based education by encouraging his learners to track the stories of place from both individualized perspectives and place stories that unfolded apart from the learner's experience. Cameron asks his learners to critically question themselves during this process as to "whether the story is in the service of the place, or whether the place is only in service to the story they are constructing" (p. 299). He cites examples of students becoming aware of the loss of indigenous stories within a landscape as a successful use of place-based educational ideals. Moreover, Cameron suggests that if these types of place stories are retold by his students, then, the power of place-responsiveness and human responsiveness coalesce to bring together a place's integrity and a learner's potential for a compassionate and sustainable relationship with it.

Cameron notes that these stories must be "true to the place itself, if it is told with critical social and ecological awareness, such a story contains at least an implicit condemnation of place being viewed as a resource or a commodity in a globalized economy" (p. 300). Cameron's critical questioning of whether learners' place stories serve the learner or place is important to consider in the context of doing place-based outdoor education. Through a discussion of place meanings in the next section, I will argue that a learner's story of place and the meanings



they attach to it can potentially enrich relationships to place while adhering to place-based educational ideals.

### Place Meanings

Conceptually, place has been described as a centre of felt value “incarnating the experience and aspirations of people. Thus it is not only an arena for everyday life. . . [it also] provides meaning for that life” (Eyles, 1989, p. 109). Theorists have suggested feeling bonded to a setting is a principle need of being human to provide stability in personal identity and in understanding our notions of self (Casey, 2001; Eyles, 1989). Environmental psychologists Low and Altman (1992) theorized that it is the ways in which people process relationships with surrounding environments that form the meanings of attachment that are associated with places.

The often-cited Yi-Fu Tuan (1974a, 1974b, 1977) described the meaning of place through the emotional bonds people form with physical settings. Yi-Fu Tuan has been considered by many to have provided a seminal part of the foundation for many modern place theories (Hubbard, Kitchin & Valentine, 2008; Seamon, 1982). However, in the context of doing place-based outdoor education, it is noteworthy that some of Tuan’s ideas have been criticized as having too much focus on human responsiveness, with little regard for the place itself (see Malpas, 1999). In other words, it has been suggested that some of Tuan’s views of place have not necessarily been true to the places themselves but were instead locked too much in the realm of human feelings and expression. This is similar to Cameron’s (2008) concern for whether his students are acknowledging place or only their construction of it. However, I will argue that many of Tuan’s foundational ideas of place have similar themes to place-based ideals that can potentially expand possibilities of doing place-based outdoor education. Some of these important links in Tuan’s work are re-explored in the following paragraphs.

Tuan (1974b) contended the meanings of a place could be found in the expressive

symbols people use when they want to give a setting greater emotional and personal sentiment. He noted that to understand a place is also to understand the makeup of a person. He suggested that the emotions people attach to locations move the experience of a particular place to a layer of meaning beyond the practical functions that other locations carry. He elaborated on this conceptualization of place through descriptions of the perceived spirit and personality that certain locations hold for those who experience them.

Tuan described the spirit of an environment in the context of places that make themselves known to observers. Tuan’s spirit of place exhibited a sense of mystery that may compare to sensing a spirit in a cemetery, an old home or indigenous ruins. Just as a human being may attempt to make her or his spirit known to the world, Tuan (1974b) thought it possible for a place’s spirit to make itself known in a variety of forms. Tuan described the personality of a place through the uniqueness that it holds. Like human beings, Tuan felt places developed and exemplified “signatures” (p. 233) over time through applied meanings that were assigned to them. He contended that the personality of a place develops just as the personality of a child becomes recognizable to a parent. In the same way a parent watches and recognizes the personality of their child grow and change, “regions have acquired unique ‘faces’ through prolonged interaction between nature and man [or woman]” (p. 234), which Tuan thought was revealed through feelings of awe and affection.

For example, the awe of a place is exhibited through its sublime and dominating characteristics (Tuan, 1974b). Tuan might suggest that environmental features that dominate places like Niagara Falls, Algonquin Park or the Yukon Territory all have awe as part of their personality. Tuan thought that places such as these command attention due to their sheer size and dominance over their surrounding landscapes.

Conversely, Tuan thought more ordinary places elicit a deeper type of affection “in

the same sense that an old rain coat can be said to have character” (Tuan, 1974b, p. 234). Places are imbued with the character that is assigned to them by those who experience specific places over long periods of time. Places, like the old raincoat, may represent objective use and meaning that over time transforms into something comforting, dependable and nurturing with a personality that can be only understood with a history of experience.

Furthermore, Tuan (1974b) asserted that places have a spirit and personality, but it is only a sentient being that can have a sense of place through the meanings that are assigned to specific locations. Tuan (1977) suggested that to sense a place is to know it on a personal and intimate level. Tuan noted that long-term sense engagement is what creates a contextual and specific sense of place over time. On another level, Tuan and others observed that people who inhabit places for long periods assign meaning to those settings subconsciously through touch, smells, sights and sounds that leave experiential memories and emotions embedded in one’s identity (Low & Altman, 1992; Tuan, 1974b).

These embedded emotions led to Tuan’s (1974b) conceptualization of place stability as reliance on feelings of home and community consistent with the same emphasis that place-based ideals often put on embracing the local. Similarly, Tuan suggested that to travel the world would create less environmental awareness than staying in one place and getting to know it intimately over time. Tuan also posited that learning the various layers and patterns of stability of a specific setting creates deeper meaning than visiting faraway places for short periods. For Tuan, the meanings of a place are captured most powerfully through repeated exposure and rootedness in particular settings. Tuan highlighted the importance of recognizing the differences between meanings attached to places of repeated exposure and those that only hold meaning to the eye (Tuan, 1977, 1974b). Tuan (1974b) considered that differences in perception are continually forming through

emotional bonds that are being attached to a setting, both consciously and subconsciously, with the potential of transforming a setting into a field of care. While public symbols are aesthetic and pleasurable sights (Niagara Falls, for instance), often instilling awe and amazement in observers, Tuan described fields of care as eliciting more permanent emotional responses. A public spectacle might be a place that is widely known as sacred, such as a formal city garden or famous national park. Alternatively, a field of care may be better represented as a local city park or a secret swimming hole on a slow-moving river that is not dependent on “ostentatious visual symbols” (p. 238). Rather, these settings become meaningful through repeated exposure and internalization of the setting into the pattern of one’s own life over time (Lowenthal, 1961). These ideas parallel place-based ideals and are consistent with notions of bringing a new localism into the pattern of one’s life.

Tuan’s conceptualization of place meanings, through the affective domain, is presented on a continuum. This includes the public and universal symbols of places as adventurous and exciting to fields of care such as being attached to a particular place or community over time. All parts of this continuum are important to consider in the context of place-based education. Tuan’s notions of place seem clearly biased toward the human realm, but I would argue are not independent of the physical environment. Tuan’s ideas seem to create a fusion between people and their environments that together create “place.” Tuan seemed very much aware of the ways places shape the identities of people as well as the ways people shape places. Additionally, Tuan seemed to favour the particular landscape over universalistic accounts, thus demonstrating his bias and respect toward local places. Where Tuan’s ideas diverge from some place-based ideals is through his emphasis on the emotional and sensual human experience. Human experience, place meanings and the particulars of local environments seem inseparable from Tuan’s perspective. By combining Tuan’s views with the place-based educational framework highlighted

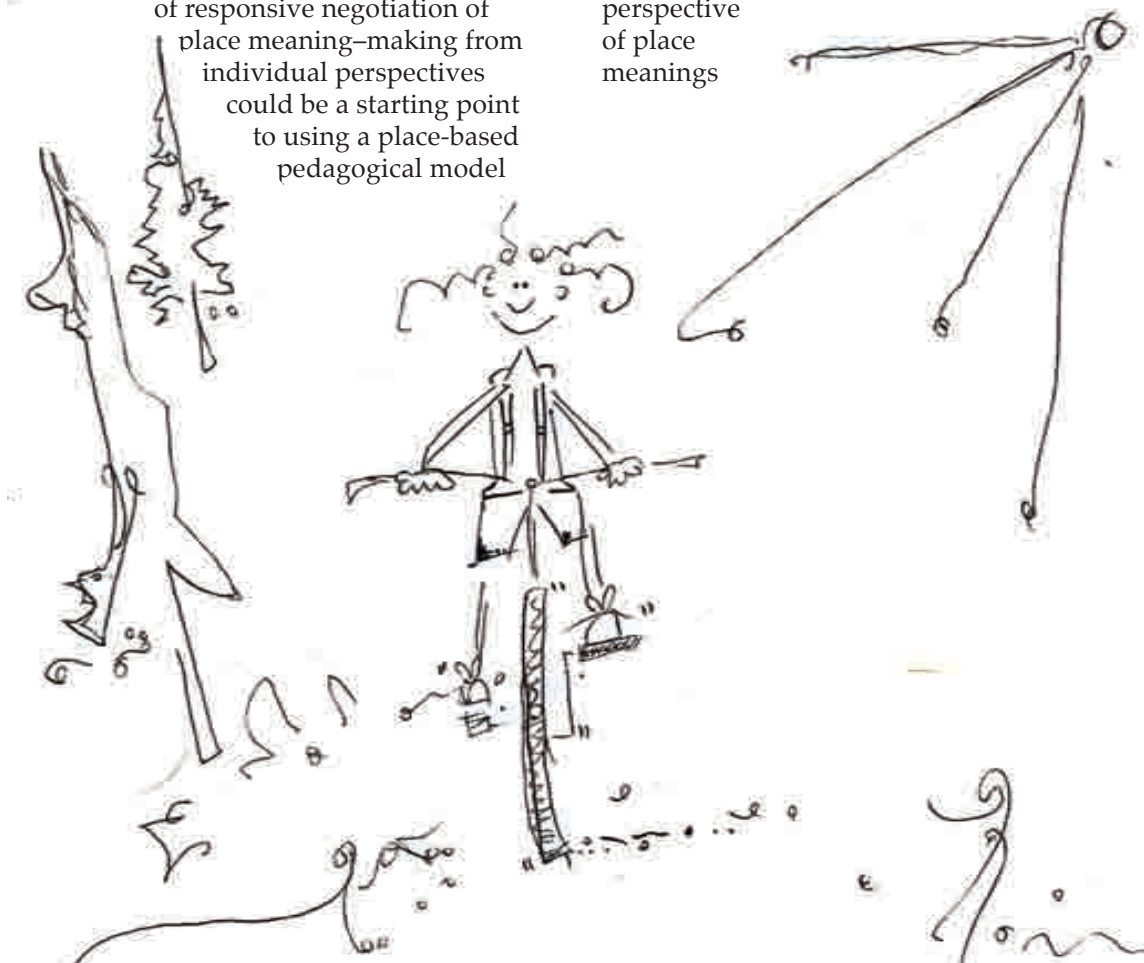
by Cameron's (2008) ideas of "re-storying" place, it seems the story of a place could become more complete and perhaps sustainable by not only honouring the place stories that have come before but also by further nurturing and exploring the current storyteller's story.

### A Synthesis of Place Meanings and Place-Based Outdoor Education

Place meanings can perhaps be used both as a way to personalize place-based outdoor education and to be critical of current practices and perspectives. Progressive thinking has already been articulated to make place-based educational ideals achievable by outdoor educators, as demonstrated by Wattchow (2006, p. 253), who suggested outdoor educators need to promote "responsive negotiation" between people and their surrounding local environments. Tapping into a process of responsive negotiation of place meaning-making from individual perspectives could be a starting point to using a place-based pedagogical model

that keeps human responses in the forefront without losing place-based ideals.

For example, as highlighted in Cosgriff (2008) and Brown (2008), it has been suggested that in New Zealand, outdoor education in schools may perhaps overemphasize adventure programs and outdoor pursuits that promote challenge and personal development with too little emphasis on the natural environment. While there has been a call to create more in-depth place-based programs that embrace place-based ideals from start to finish (see Brown, 2008), current adventure-oriented programs could also integrate place-based ideals into their outdoor experiences without abandoning adventure and challenge as their core. As suggested by Cosgriff (2008), they might be encouraged to do more to teach about place within their programmatic structures and tie adventure and challenge to the local landscape. From the perspective of place meanings



described in this paper, if adventure and challenge become reference points for learner-centred place meaning, perhaps it would be possible to re-contextualize adventure as a means to learning about and responding to the needs of local places.

For instance, while debriefing a rock climbing experience, outdoor educators could perhaps do more to discuss and highlight a learner's adventurous experience with the landscape and then connect that experience to the place's social and environmental history and challenges. Again, this might give learners a chance to connect their own stories of the landscape with those stories that came before theirs. And this may provide a reference point for positive memories, further reflection and self-critique regarding the nature and power of person-place relations. In terms of doing place-based outdoor education, this intentional connection could provide a learner a context for what a sustainable and mindful person-place relationship looks and feels like.

I do worry that this suggestion would lead to places being viewed as commodities that provide adventure and challenges for those who can afford it—negating any hope of creating sustainable place-based ethics. In other words, I worry this approach could inspire the valuing of a place only because it provides people with a service or product of some kind. However, I believe place meanings may also be able to inspire Cameron's (2008) ideas of re-storying one's experience "alongside" a place's history to potentially create a catalyst for people to see themselves more clearly within and a part of local landscapes. Critics might argue that such a leap might promote too much of an anthropocentric perspective within person-place experiences, and, to some extent, those critics are likely right.

However, I can't help but wonder about a place-based perspective that does more to embrace place meanings as well as their implications for outdoor educators who potentially can guide others toward living

in harmony with their local places in a compassionate coexistence. This coexistence might be crystallized by a mutual understanding and respect for diversity in place-meaning views in conjunction with place-based ideals that serve to protect and revere the local. The rather positive view of place meanings presented in this paper does not mean to discount other pertinent issues like critical views of place that further explore and critique politics, gender roles and class that are inherent parts of experiencing place but are often lacking in place-based literature (Morehouse, 2008). Instead, the view presented in this paper is meant to inspire further dialogue about the topic of place-based education through arguing for a more intentional integration of individualized place meanings within a place-based outdoor education context.

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