

2006

## Connectedness in the Wildernes Experience: Interpretation of Sense of Place During a National Outdoor Leadership School Instructor Course

Garrett Hutson  
*Oklahoma State University - Stillwater*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/reseoutded>



Part of the [Environmental Education Commons](#), and the [Leisure Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hutson, Garrett (2006) "Connectedness in the Wildernes Experience: Interpretation of Sense of Place During a National Outdoor Leadership School Instructor Course," *Research in Outdoor Education*: Vol. 8, Article 19.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/reseoutded/vol8/iss1/19>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Cortland. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research in Outdoor Education by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Cortland. For more information, please contact [DigitalCommonsSubmissions@cortland.edu](mailto:DigitalCommonsSubmissions@cortland.edu).

HUTSON

## **CONNECTEDNESS IN THE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE: INTERPRETATION OF SENSE OF PLACE DURING A NATIONAL OUTDOOR LEADERSHIP SCHOOL INSTRUCTOR COURSE**

Garrett Hutson, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater

---

### **Background**

This study explored the concept of sense of place during a 30-day National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) extended wilderness experience in a mountain range in the western United States. Sense of place is not a fixed concept, but may be best understood as a moving force that touches people's emotions on a variety of levels through the bonds they form with places (Tuan, 1974). The term has been utilized in such fields as geography and architecture since the early 1970s (Williams & Stewart, 1998). Scholars of leisure, recreation, and outdoor education are increasingly utilizing this concept because it holistically captures the value people place on "resources, lands, landscapes and ecosystems" (p.20).

### **Methods**

The purpose of the study was to describe individuals' sense of place within a wilderness experience. One primary research question guided this study: How do NOLS course participants define their sense of place throughout an extended wilderness experience? The research question was addressed using a phenomenological framework. This framework helped to capture the intersection of the place experience, the intentions, and the meaning construction of the participants during the lived wilderness experience (Roberts, 1996). The study included semi-structured personal interviews with 14 NOLS course participants during a single 30-day NOLS instructor course. Interviews were conducted throughout the 30-day experience and ranged in length from five minutes to one hour. Varied procedures were utilized while questioning the participants. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher who was a student on the course. Transcripts were read repeatedly to discern patterns and analyzed using a coding frame that emerged from the study of the narratives.

### **Results**

The study revealed two core themes: (1) the meaning of the phenomena was recognized as participants' awareness of their relationships with the place. This awareness acted as an avenue through which the second core theme developed in which (2) the deeper meaning of the phenomena was recognized as a sense of connectedness. Connectedness was articulated as feeling at home, experiencing oneness, sensing a strengthened spirituality, and undergoing transformation. Participants' sense of connectedness was the bond between humans and the natural world (Nodurft, 1997). Participants in the study described feelings of connectedness in a variety of ways, some connoting the power of nurturing energy from the experience, others more the inspirational impact.

### **Discussion**

The findings from this study may help outdoor educators to further understand the role that sense of place has within wilderness experiences. Developing a sense of place appears to support the emergence of a more authentic type of environmental awareness. It is hoped that such research

HUTSON

will illuminate individual and collective deep wilderness place experiences. Outdoor educators may act as “translators” (McAvoy, 2002, p. 394) of sense of place, teaching themselves to articulate the experience of place in an intentional way. Outdoor educators may then be able to better facilitate meaningful and sustainable outdoor experiences for all of those who work, visit, live, and recreate in some of the world’s most sacred places.

### References

- McAvoy, L. (2002). American Indians, place meanings and the old/new west. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 34(4), 383-396.
- Nodurft, S. (1997). The impact of an outdoor wilderness program on the participant’s sense of connectedness to the natural world (Doctoral dissertation, University of Southern Mississippi, 1998). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 59, 449.
- Roberts, E. (1996). Place and the spirit in public land management. In B. L. Driver, D. Dustin, T. Baltic, G. Elsner, and G. Peterson (Eds.), *Nature and the human spirit: Toward an expanded land management ethic*. (pp. 61-78). State College, PA; Venture.
- Tuan, Y. F. (1974). *Topophilia: A study of environmental perception, attitudes and values*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Williams, D. R., & Stewart, S. (1998). Sense of place: An elusive concept that is finding a place in ecosystem management. *Journal of Forestry*, 96(5), 18-23.

Contact: Garrett Hutson at garrettiswhere@yahoo.com