Relationship to Place as Catalyst for Positive Change

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of individuals who self-identify as having a long-term relationship to park spaces within the Capital Region of South Vancouver Island, British Columbia. This study was guided by the main research question: how might an individual's deeper relationship to place become a catalyst for positive change? Participants who engage in a variety of activities within park spaces were interviewed and interview data was analyzed, with five major themes emerging: First, the value of habit in creating patterns of meaning and transformation in one's life. Second, the value of longitudinal relationships with a place through the medium of a meaningful experience/activity. Third, the value of early exposure to the natural world and the fundamental ways of being and knowing this fosters. Fourth, the value of noticing: how micro through macro observations reflect changes in both the landscape and self. And finally, the revelatory effect of time in nature and how this transforms the substance of self in its wake. These findings provide grounding for further synthesis as I seek to render legible the structures and dynamics of relationship to place within a bounded geography and pattern context. This work aims to contribute to the vast body of literature on place theory and our societal response to the climate crisis, both epistemologically and ontologically.

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Acknowledgements

Land Acknowledgment

I am a settler of mixed Irish, English, and Lebanese ancestry, living as an uninvited guest on the lands of the lək̓ʷəŋən, W̱SÁNEĆ, and T'Sou-ke peoples. The first peoples' relationships with the land have existed since time immemorial and remain strong today, despite the intent of the genocidal Canadian colonial project. The research, interviews, and described experiences in this study all take place on stolen Indigenous land and must be situated as such. I strive to be in this place with respect, gratitude, and humility, and contribute in a good way to the work of reconciliation—HÍSW̱ḴE SIÁM.

Introduction

> We must change our lives, so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption that what is good for the world will be good for us. And that requires the effort to know the world and what is good for it... We must learn to acknowledge that creation is full of mystery; we will never entirely understand it. We must abandon arrogance and stand in awe. We must recover the sense of the majesty of creation... For I do not doubt that it is only on the condition of humility and reverence before the world that our species will be able to remain in it.
>
> — Wendell Berry, *A Native Hill,* 1968

There is a rich tradition of place-based research and analysis in socio-environmental studies, examining the conditions and variables through which one might more deeply associate with a place and what feelings or behaviors this may in turn engender or enact. Here, in the Capital Region of what is now known as Vancouver Island, increasingly dense population centers are expanding up to the boundaries of greenspaces, the majority of which are formally protected as parks through the jurisdiction of municipal, regional, and provincial governments. Formerly undeveloped lands have fallen to the pressures of urbanization as communities grapple with the complex intersections of housing and affordability crises, climate change, and the protection of natural environments. Access to natural spaces is of wide-ranging value to the public, promoting an understanding of local biodiversity and habitat as well as providing physical, mental, and spiritual health benefits. However, common use and valuation of parks and other protected greenspaces is predicated on a dualistic paradigm endemic to Western thought: the normative belief that humans stand apart from natural systems, living separate lives in artificial environments, able to control and extract from nature at our discretion. One goes to a park to commune with nature and then returns to the artificiality of built environments; it is a transactional experience, bound through time, medium, and place. Our *understanding* of nature has been reduced to the idea of a park: one feels no particular sense of self as nested within natural systems across scale, or a depth of connection to the land which transcends relationships of exchange.

This is especially problematic vis-à-vis an overarching context of the climate crisis. The negative effects of a changing climate which once seemed distant are now acutely felt through sea level rise, storm intensity, and longer heatwaves (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2021). However, the dominant culture remains rooted in behavioral structures seemingly impossible to break: the cycle of production and consumption supplemented by periods of interaction with 'nature,' without any lasting effect on the psyche. Given the unsustainability of this normative ontology, it follows to ask: what experiences might advance transformative knowledge, altering one's fundamental relationship with natural spaces and systems? How might these new epistemologies contribute to sustainable, or even regenerative, ways of being and doing? What might policymakers learn from this new knowledge to incorporate into frameworks and practices which may scale across society, transitioning our paradigm from the failed status quo?

This study aims to address the fundamental question: how might an individual's deeper relationship to place become a catalyst for positive change? Within this research umbrella the study seeks to explore the following topics:

- How might established habits of mediated experiences in nature change oneself over time?

- How might longitudinal relationships with a specific place change one's sense of the place, and of self?

- What might be the value and effect of micro and macro observations and reflections in familiar natural settings?

- How might early and often exposure to natural spaces create a foundation upon which one draws through life?

- And how might the changes immersion in nature bring about in self be experienced once one returns to built environments?

The Capital Region District of South Vancouver Island, British Columbia, enjoys a variety of parks and protected areas including 5 Provincial Parks, 32 Regional Parks, and numerous municipal parks. These places range from small, urban greenspaces to expansive backcountry zones which may feel wild and remote, even with their relative proximity to population centers. Through the dynamism of available experiences, the study engaged with a variety of greenspace users, focusing on the variables of park type and preferred activity. The interviewees range in age and are walkers, hikers, runners, mountain bikers, and rock climbers. They live generally urban existences but have developed routines and patterns which find them spending regular time in the greenspace in the region best suited to their sensibilities and preferred medium of engagement. And this drive to engage in the activities which they have come to love and see as foundational to self stretch over years and decades, forging bonds to place which may only coalesce with joy, curiosity, patience, and time.

I chose to focus on active experiences in natural places as someone who too has felt transcendent shifts in the understanding of my ecological self through time spent truly getting to know somewhere, beyond what may be gleaned through casual interaction. I'm keenly interested in the substance of repeat engagement through time, the potentially transformative epistemology of habit, and the absorption of novel insight at nature's pace, as opposed to the artificial velocity of contemporary civilization. I believe that love and connection are the crucial foundation from which regenerative futures may be conceived, realized, and flourish, and I wished to explore this inclination in others, to both challenge and validate this intuition and perspective.

This study will first establish the necessary background and context which informs the research and its conclusions, entailing a brief history of park creation in the Capital Region, an overview of core place theory tenets, and establishing the climate crisis as the psychosociological backdrop against which we live our lives. Research methodology will then be outlined including participant recruitment, interview structure, analysis approach, and identifying researcher bias. Study findings will be presented in five thematic groupings that emerge 'bottom up' through analysis. Finally, the thesis will draw conclusions and pose recommendations, as well as ask further questions which follow from the practical and theoretical terrain explored throughout this work.

Research Context

Foundational knowledge grounding this study comes from three high-level topic areas:

- The construction of 'nature' in settler-colonial societies generally and the history of park creation on South Vancouver Island in particular.

- Place attachment theory.

- Anthropogenic climate change as an ontological backdrop.

This section provides a brief overview on each topic, illustrates their interconnections, and situates the research findings within relevant theoretical frameworks.

The Construction of 'Nature' in Settler-Colonial Societies and the Establishment of Parks on South Vancouver Island

Neil Evernden argues that the contemporary Western basis for epistemologies and norms regarding 'nature' are rooted in Hobbes' *Natural Law*, which is based upon the belief that "it is that abyss of brutality that which humans are said to have struggled to free themselves so as to permit existence in a civilized society" (1992, p. 3). That is, 'nature' is malevolent, untamable, unknowable, foreign, and dangerous. We have 'othered' ourselves within built environments and systems untethered from the rhythm and flow of the 'natural world,' and codified these norms over time as justification for the extractive and destructive tendencies of Western colonialism. But from who and where do these norms emerge? Evernden questions, "from reason alone? From the blueprints of 'experts'? But who are they? To whom are we to entrust the engineering of the *concept* of nature?" (1992, p. 28).

This worldview of otherness from nature continued to crystallize as part of the conquest and colonization of 'North America'; through this lens, the continent was a seemingly endless expanse of natural resources to be extracted and capitalized, regardless of dispossession, displacement, and ecological degradation (Willow, 2016, p. 3). This trend continued westward to

the land of the lək̓ʷəŋən, W̱SÁNEĆ, and T'Sou-ke peoples, or what is now commonly known as

the Capital Regional District, comprised of 13 municipalities and three electoral areas on

Southern Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands with a population approaching 450,000 (CRD,

2022). Fort Victoria (now the City of Victoria) was founded by the Hudson's Bay Company

(HBC) on March 14, 1843, as a trading post to solidify British presence north of the 49th

parallel. Following this, by a Royal Grant dated January 13, 1849, HBC received title to the

whole of Vancouver Island on the condition that colonization be undertaken. James Douglas led

this project with the assistance of his colleagues in the fur trade (City of Victoria, 2022). It is

important to note that a core tenet of settler colonialism is the explicit intention to replicate the

old world upon the 'new' and perpetuate its fundamental economic imperative for land

(Edmonds, 2010, p. 7). This is unlike the 'franchise-colonial' model seen in a place like New

Deli, where the colonizers establish "inward-looking, protective cantonments" within established

cities (Edmonds, 2010, p. 7). What followed was the imposition of Eurocentric norms of 'nature'

vis-à-vis colonial extractivist capitalism, manifested through processes of dispossession,

displacement, and erasure of Indigenous spaces in Victoria throughout the 19th and 20th

centuries (Simpson & Bagelman, 2018). And while the land now known as 'Beacon Hill Park'

(*Meeqan* in the Lekwungen language) was set aside by Douglas in 1842 as it resembled the

British 19th-century Romantic ideal of a picturesque countryside, this area was abused by the

colonists for decades following: cutting trees for firewood and construction, hunting, running

dogs, and riding horses. Though the HBC did not plow land in the park, livestock were permitted

to graze on Beacon Hill and surrounding meadows (Ringuette, 2004). The park was never

intended to capture a Eurocentric, idealized parcel of wilderness, but to service the aesthetic,

recreational, and practical needs of the colonizers directly adjacent to the growing settlement.

The earliest example of Eurocentric normative impositions of 'nature' on South Vancouver Island—that is, in the bounded space of a park—was the creation of what is now known as Mount Douglas Park in Saanich, on the site of the mountain known as PKOLS in the SENĆOŦEN language of the W̱SÁNEĆ peoples (Hilderbrand, n.d.).

On September 30, 1889, the Province of British Columbia granted Mount Douglas to the Corporation of the City of Victoria "upon trust to maintain and preserve the same as a public park or pleasure ground for the use, recreation and enjoyment of the public" (Friends of Mount Douglas Park, 2017). However, it took nearly a century of development pressures in the Capital Region for additional parks to be formally established at scale, as settler environmentalists concerned about the destruction of local ecosystems worked to protect areas that, while having experienced some degree of human intervention through logging or other resource related activities, were still (mostly) free of structures or other permanent installations. The following is a brief history of the additional five parks which feature prominently in the participant experiences in this study, presented in chronological order.

Thetis Lake has been a focal point of settler activity in the Capital Region since shortly after colonization. Its long history includes logging, hydro power, and designation as a protected source of drinking water for the growing settlement of Victoria (Crocker, 1990). In 1932, it was officially established as an area for recreational use including swimming, boating, and a dance pavilion. Louise Baur is quoted in Crocker's *Cultural History of Three Regional Parks* as stating "Thetis Lake was the place to go during World War II, just as the Gorge was the place to go during the first war" (1999, p. 29). In the post-WWII boom, the City of Victoria considered developing the area directly adjacent to the lake as a residential area. The Thetis Park Nature Sanctuary Association was formed in opposition to these plans and on February 27, 1958, Victoria City Council adopted the recommendation to bring Thetis Lake Park Sanctuary into

being, quite likely the first nature sanctuary in Canada (Crocker, 1990, p. 32). In 1975, Thetis

Lake and the Nature Sanctuary around it were given official park status, protecting it from

subdivisions and resource development, with management transferred to the CRD in 1993

(CRD, 2022).

The District of Highlands just northwest of Victoria maintained a rural character through

the continued urbanization of the Capital Region during the 20th century and is now home to

many of the region's parks. The CRD government purchased the lands which now comprise the

Mount Work Regional Park in 1969, establishing the park in 1970 (CRD, 2022). This 743

hectare park is home to rare and diverse coastal ecosystems, three large freshwater lakes, and

provides recreational opportunities for runners, hikers, mountain bikers, and rock climbers

(CRD, 2022). The Mount Work summit is the highpoint on the Saanich Peninsula and provides

the connective tissue between Gowlland Tod Provincial Park and Thetis Lake Regional Park.

Near the site where the Spanish explorer Manuel Quimper landed in 1790, the land

which now comprises East Sooke Regional Park on the southern tip of Vancouver Island has

seen settler activity since the mid-1800s through mining, farming, and selective logging.

Alldridge Point, home to distinctive petroglyphs in the Coast Salish style, was first designated as

a Provincial Heritage Site in 1927 (CRD, 2018). Much of the rest of the land was privately

owned by a consortium of European investors with the intention of a private hunting and fishing

retreat. However, their tenure fell into financial and legal entanglement and the landowners were

forced to sell. The CRD purchased the land in 1970 and established a 3,417 acre park, which,

while bearing the imprint of an extractive past, offers an immersive experience in its Maritime

Coastal Western Hemlock ecosystems, especially on the rugged 10km coastal trail (Vancouver

Island Big Trees, 2012).

Gowlland Tod Provincial Park comprises 1219 hectares of rare dry Coastal Douglas-

fir ecosystems, rising on the east side of the Finlayson Arm in Saanich Inlet (BC Parks, 1996, p.

13). The park was created in the wake of the 1994 Commonwealth Games hosted in Victoria.

Local and provincial governments in partnership with private enterprise formed the

Commonwealth Nature Legacy, the purpose of which was to protect the remaining natural

spaces that surrounded the ever-expanding region (VancouverIsland.com, 2021). Gowlland Tod

provides what one might consider a 'wild' experience, with challenging terrain and a sense of

remoteness within 20 minutes of downtown Victoria. As well, it provides connectivity to

Goldstream Provincial Park (Mount Finlayson) and Mount Work Regional Park as part of a

regional greenbelt/trail network.

  The last of the focal areas for this study is the sprawling semi-wilderness of what is

commonly referred to as the Sooke Hills, a landmass comprising numerous connected discrete

parks: Sooke Mountain Provincial Park, Sooke Hills Wilderness Regional Park, Sea to Sea

Regional Park, and Mount Wells Regional Park. The Sooke Hills Wilderness Regional Park

Reserve is the largest of the protected areas at 4,124 hectares, followed closely by Sea to Sea

at 4000 hectares, and was established in 1997 to buffer the freshwater supply zone for the

entire Capital Region (CRD, 2022). This contiguous greenspace, while bearing the scars of

early settler resource activity through logging and hydro projects, offers the most 'wild'

experience proximate to a region of nearly half a million people. Home to bears, cougars, elk,

and wolves, these parks are critical habitat to species under pressure from the relentless

development drive on its borders (CRD, 2022).

  With this very brief history in mind, how might we contextualize the role and value of the

park system in the capital region vis-à-vis the crux of the study: exploring how building deeper

relationships to place might foster regenerative societal transformation. Recounting the history

of these park spaces is a reminder of how normative representations of nature—that is, as

existing within defined park boundaries, owned and maintained by colonial governments—are a potent conditioning experience, powerfully affective and emotive, reinforcing settler expectations of entitlement to the land through the dualism of urbanized life/natural experience (Simpson & Bagelman, 2018, p. 565). Again we revisit the notion that our prevailing idea of 'nature' is a complex construct, much of which is intended to serve the desires of a beneficiary ruling class. Indeed, as the philosopher Timothy Morton posits, the very concept of 'nature' is rooted in racist ends; a useful device through which to construct an 'us' and 'them' (Petroni, 2019, para. 7). When we absolve ourselves of our ecological connections to the natural systems we are nested within and dependent upon, it makes for easier normative behaviours of extraction, waste, inequality, injustice, and oppression. This is the epistemological foundation against which we place our common ideas of parks, and the ontological inheritance through which we recreate while communing with the natural world.

A Summary of Relevant Place Attachment Theory

Place attachment theory is a broad, varied, and multidisciplinary field in academia, a comprehensive review of which is outside the scope of this thesis. I will instead summarize basic concepts from relevant theory for the purposes of grounding the study, its findings, and associated recommendations.

Many different conceptions of the bond between people and places—place attachment or 'sense of place'—have been hypothesized and studied. Consistent throughout most research on place attachment is the importance of time spent at a select location; the longitudinal relationship with a place and the emotional/perceptive change that occurs in the person (Smaldone, 2006, p. 47). This longitudinal dynamic is foundational to the strength of the place attachment. Stokols and Shumaker (1981) argue that endurance and frequency are the two critical objective variables: endurance referring to the length of place association and frequency

to how often the individual visits the place in question (Smaldone, 2006, p. 47). A sense of place may serve numerous overlapping and intersecting aspects of self-image and understanding of relationality to the exterior world. Place attachment is fundamentally a bond between people and the environment, brought to life through symbolic meaning created and nurtured through the relationship (Stedman, 2002, p. 563). Hay (1998) proposes a typology of place attachments:

- Superficial: common to tourists and transients, lacking social connection and often aesthetic in nature;

- Partial: found in part-time residents of an area, growing but still weak;

- Personal: developed outside of strong social networks, fulsome but lacking in stability;

- Ancestral: for non-Indigenous peoples who are born, raised, and remain in a place;

- Cultural: deep, emotional, spatial, and socially grounded. Characteristic of Indigenous relationships with their traditional land (Clermont et. al, 2019, p. 192).

Most interviewees in this study could be categorized as having personal or ancestral connections to the places (via the experiences) they describe.

Tuan (1974) coined the term 'topophilia' to describe how powerful place attachment helps define identity, so far as harm to a place may be perceived as a harm to the individual (Clermont et. al, 2019, p. 191). With regards to beliefs and identity, we must understand the meaning of a place to understand its importance to the person in their construction of intensity and relationality to the exterior world. Simply knowing someone is strongly attached to place does not reveal the *why* of the attachment or how that in turn may inspire action; a person may be strongly attached to a place for a wide variety of reasons, subjective and experiential (Stedman, 2002, p. 566). This is the value of qualitative inquiry in understanding specific lived experiences of a person in place through time; the meaning-making exercise of repeat engagement and how it shapes both epistemology and ontology. In alignment with Cantrill and

Senecah (2001), I will argue that the dynamics of a mediated experience in a 'natural'

environment over time foster a change in self-perception and position the individual in a more

holistic relationship with non-human life, as well as potentially advancing a conservation mindset

and associated advocacy. Our conception of 'nature' is rooted in the pairing of experiences

bound in local settings as well as the sociocultural conditioning of our upbringing and adult

existence. In the Capital Region, this is the fundamentally white, settler-colonial norms of

city/suburban/quasi-rural living with an interspersed patchwork of parkland to satisfy the

naturalist and/or recreative impulse; critically, 'nature' is elsewhere, bounded by lines on a map,

requiring travel and perceptive shift upon entry. And while the influence of cultural norms and

media inputs helps shape our conception of 'nature,' it is our first-person experiences on a day-

to-day basis that overwhelmingly influence our perceptions of self within the system and its

complexity of relationships (Cantrill and Senecah, 2001, p. 188). Finally, our experiences in

nature and impacts on the formation of the self are a key influencer in our perception of the

gravity of the environmental problems we face (Cantrill, 1996, p. 80). The lived experience of

place through time imbues one with a powerfully subjective understanding which may have

knock-on effects. This is a logical transition to the discussion of the overarching context of

anthropogenic climate change and its manifest crisis.

Climate Crisis as the Backdrop to our Lives

The overarching psycho-sociological context for this work is the omnipresent spectre of

the climate crisis. The 2021 wildfire season in British Columbia saw 1,600 fires burning nearly

8,700 square kilometres of land, the third worst on record in terms of area burned (Kulkarni,

2021, para. 1). The three worst wildfire seasons in BC (defined by duration and scale) have

been in the past six years (Culbert, 2019). Severe and prolonged wildfire seasons are now a

way of life for British Columbians. As Mike Flannigan, professor of Renewable Resources at the

University of Alberta and Director of the Western Partnership for Wildland Fire Science, puts it,

"the future is smoky" (Climate Atlas, 2022). But fire is not the only harbinger of a rapidly

changing climate in BC. In November 2021, the Fraser Valley, accustomed to seasonal flooding,

experienced its most extreme rainfall and flooding events in recorded history. Roads and

bridges were destroyed with hundreds of people requiring helicopter rescue. Houses were

washed away or torn apart by the surging waters. "This is the kind of thing that we certainly

expect with climate change—the intensity of the landslides and floods could become worse,"

states Brent Ward, professor at Simon Fraser University and co-director for the Centre for

Natural Hazards Studies (Schmunk, 2021, para. 20).

This is the acute experience of the climate crisis for British Columbians; foreboden,

visceral, and cascading. The cycle of disaster and tepid government response in its mitigation

and adaptation efforts is a logical incubator for both climate anxiety and grief, defined as

apprehension and stress about anticipated threats to salient ecosystems and grief in relation to

ecological loss related to climate change (Cunsolo and Ellis, 2020, p. 261). These are logical

responses to the climate context by those with close relationships to the natural environment, as

grief is a natural human response to loss, and anxiety a response to rationally anticipated future

losses (Cunsolo and Ellis, 2020, p. 261). Those who feel a sense of connection to the land

which transcends exchange economics have felt the grief of human destruction and hubris for a

long time. As American author and early ecologist Aldo Leopold (1953) exclaimed, "one of the

penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds" (p. 165).

Maria Ojala argues that both climate grief and anxiety can be seen as existential in

nature, given that they touch on three aspects central to this kind of anxiety: ontological, as the

crisis raises questions about the survival of humanity and immediate personal well-being; moral,

as it begs the questions of whether it is right to live the way we do in our society vis-à-vis our

relations to nature; and spiritual, given swings of hopelessness and optimism when considering the seriousness and complexity of this crisis (2016, p. 44).

For many, fear, regret, and stress are restricting emotions that may act as blockers and prevent us from doing what we know to be right. In the context of the climate crisis, this is an 'environmental numbness' which may become ubiquitous and existential (Westoby and McNamara, 2019, p. 500). Many of us feel and wear this grief and anxiety intuitively, even subconsciously, rather than an explicit or intentional daily act. I present the climate crisis as a backdrop for the study because, as Leopold states above, ecologically-minded people—those who understand themselves as in relationship to places they've imbued with meaning through engagement over time—are far more likely to carry a weight from the climate crisis in their daily lives. And while challenging and pervasive, in combination with the accountability to place one feels, it may also act as catalyst for positive action. Scannell and Gifford note that a more locally-focused articulation of climate change increases personal relevancy and message efficacy. In turn, this engenders local opportunity and action (2013, p. 64). This is supplemented through place attachment and its ability to engender "place-protective intentions" (2013, p. 66). While not a guarantee for climate-positive action, Scannell and Gifford found that lack of attachment with place is a key barrier to climate action, and "when individuals recognize that the impacts of global climate change have local implications, they may become more averse to its risks and then mobilise themselves to act" (2013, p. 77).

While seemingly discrete and vast as areas of academia, the synthesis and contextualization of how 'nature' is constructed in settler-colonial societies (along with a brief the history of park creation on South Vancouver Island) and place attachment theory, placed against the overarching spectre of anthropogenic climate change, sets the scene for the study themes, and recommendations. Indeed, the process of becoming in place, growing the

relationship, and reflecting on the outward effects is the byproduct of complex, interconnected

histories and experiences.

Methodology

Introduction

This study employed a phenomenological approach to understanding participant

relationships to park spaces in the Capital Region. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

defines phenomenology as "the study of structures of experience, or consciousness. Literally,

phenomenology is the study of 'phenomena': appearances of things, or things as they appear in

our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our

experience" (Stanford, 2021). I am drawn to a phenomenological frame for this work as it

understands parts only against their necessarily contextualizing whole (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 4).

It "insists that identity and intelligibility are available in things, and that we ourselves are defined

as the ones to whom such identities and intelligibilities are given" (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 4). This

study employed a qualitative approach to data collection through exploratory research. The

qualitative tradition can be described "as a critique of positivism as the reigning epistemology,

and a recognition of the need for alternative ways to produce knowledge" (O'Leary, 2017, p.

141). It is "an attempt to understand the world from the point of view of its participants," rather

than searching for an 'objective' truth or prioritizing the researcher's point of view (O'Leary,

2017, p. 141).

Participant Selection and Recruitment

As the goal of this study was to better understand the ontological and epistemological

change of participants through exploring their long-term relationship with a specific

park/greenspace, I leveraged outdoor recreation associations and conservation organizations

as the primary sources of recruitment. Groups contacted and recruited from include the

following:

- Mount Work Coalition;

- Friends of Mount Douglas Park Society;

- Victoria Natural History Society;

- Outdoor Club of Victoria;

- South Island Mountain Bike Society, and

- South Island Climber's Association.

In order to participate in this study, all recruits were required to be English-speaking, over the age of 18, a resident of the Capital Region, and a frequent user of local greenspaces.

Table 1

Interviewee pseudonyms and demographic information

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Gender	Age	Activities
Jim	White	Male	65+	Hiker, cyclist
Erin	White	Female	45-54	Hiker
Harold	White	Male	65+	Hiker
Holly	White	Female	25-34	Runner, cyclist
Chris	White	Male	65+	Hiker
Jesse	White	Female	45-54	Hiker
Mary	White	Female	65+	Hiker
Kelly	White	Female	55-64	Hiker
Hank	South Asian	Male	35-44	Runner, climber
Raymond	East Asian	Male	45-54	Hiker, climber
Paul	White	Male	35-44	Hiker, climber
Kristen	White	Female	35-44	Climber, cyclist, runner
Val	White	Female	65+	Hiker
Jeremy	White	Male	65+	Hiker

Riley	White	Male	65+	Hiker
Pamela	White	Female	65+	Hiker

Note. Interviewees all affiliated with established outdoors organizations in the Capital Region of Vancouver Island, BC.

Data Collection

Prior to data collection, ethics approval was sought and gained from the Royal Roads University Ethics Board (see Appendix A). This study leveraged the generative and experiential power of informal interviewing to explore place attachment and its underlying epistemological and ontological implications within the context of parks in the Capital Regional District. As Given (2012) notes, "in contemporary qualitative research, place is thought of as a bounded phenomenon—ranging from the scale of regions to buildings—but within which and with which social and psychological relations are formed." O'Leary defines informal interviewing as "bending or ignoring rules and roles associated with formal interviewing in order to establish rapport, gain trust, and open lines of communication. The style is casual and relaxed in order to minimize any gulf between the interviewer and interviewee" (2017, p. 239).

With the goal of achieving data saturation, 16 semi-structured interviews were scheduled January through March 2022. Saturation is the point in a study at which additional data no longer adds depth, richness, or understanding and theories/themes are already emergent or established (O'Leary, 2017, p. 144). Saturation of the emergent themes was achieved through these 16 interviews. The interviews were recorded digitally and I reviewed and transcribed where relevant. Limitations with this participant group include a trend to older ages as well as a predominant whiteness, which are reflective of regional demographics (Statistics Canada, 2016).

I drafted and followed a general interview guide (see Appendix B), which provided for a consistent structure to the engagements but also allowed for flexibility in question ordering and the space for participants to elaborate on pertinent conceptual threads. The interview structure also allowed for me to ask relevant unscripted follow-up questions prompted by unexpected participant insights and/or digressions. The semi-structured, open-ended nature of inquiry allowed for participants to describe and explain experiences and phenomena relevant and impactful to them in their own words. Before the interviews began each participant, in accordance with ethical guidelines, signed a consent form (see Appendix C), and/or consented verbally. Participants were informed that their anonymity would be protected and every effort would be made to remove potentially identifying information.

One-on-One Interviews

The process for recruitment and interviews was as follows:

1. I contacted outdoors organizations in the Capital Region via email with general information about the study and an associated invitation for member participation as an interview subject. Members who indicated a willingness to participate were then sent an invitation that was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Board (see Appendix D). Interviews were scheduled via Google Calendar and interviews took place remotely via phone or Zoom due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Before the interview, each participant was provided an opportunity to read and sign the informed consent form. After consenting to the form and/or providing verbal consent the interview was conducted.

3. Interviews were between 30-60 minutes depending on the participant. All interviews were audio recorded.

Researcher Bias

Central to conducting qualitative research is the researcher as "research instrument" (Chenail, 2011, p. 255). The researcher is the key person in obtaining data from study participants. It is through the researcher's facilitation that a "context is created where respondents share rich data regarding their experiences and life world" (Chenail, 2011, p. 255). It is the researcher that creates the environment in which value may be exchanged, through an intuitive read of participant dynamics and adaptation. This creation of a trustful and comfortable atmosphere is key for the participant so that they may feel heard and understood (Chenail, 2011, p. 255). However, the researcher as instrument may be the greatest threat to objectivity in qualitative research if "time is not spent on preparation of the field, reflexivity of the researcher, the researcher staying humble and preferring to work in teams so that triangulation and peer evaluation can take place" (Chenail, 2011, p. 256).

I maintained a reflective practice—defined by Donald Schön as "the ability to reflect on one's actions so as to engage in a process of continuous learning" (Cambridge, 2022)—throughout the study, continually examining my own predilections and remaining cognizant of the active co-creation of knowledge with study participants. As noted in Carter & Little (2007, p. 1319), the strength of qualitative research lies in its engagement with people's subjectivity, and as such one should be transparent about their own subjectivity, to enable an informed audience evaluation of any theorizing and conclusions. I am an outdoors athlete and a self-described 'conservationist' with a keen interest in ecological spirituality and axiology. These personal interests and associated character traits are influencing variables which were routinely considered throughout the study.

Data Analysis

Primary data was analyzed through traditional qualitative data analysis processes and methods: noting overall impressions, iterative reduction, organization and coding, establishing patterns and interconnections, mapping and theming, and finally, theorizing and drawing conclusions (O'Leary, 2017, p. 331). This study leverages a grounded theory analytical approach, which is:

> [a] method that combines two data analysis processes. In the first process, the analyst codes all data and then systematically analyzes these codes to verify or prove a given proposition. In the second process, the analyst does not engage in coding data per se but merely inspects the data for properties of categories, uses memos to track the analysis, and develops theoretical ideas (Myrick & Walker, 2006, p. 548).

Data was coded utilizing a 'bottom-up' approach (inductively). The use of an inductive approach is common in several types of qualitative data analyses, especially grounded theory (Thomas, 2006, p. 239). Through a line-by-line examination of all data sources in the study one systematically builds "categories of understanding" (O'Leary, 2017, p. 332). The outcome of an inductive analysis process is the development of codes which summarize the raw data and convey key themes and processes. Codes are commonly created from research subject verbatims or meanings in specific text segments and applied thematically across the entire body of data (Thomas, 2006, p. 240). Finally, codes are revised and/or refined. Codes may be combined or linked under a superordinate category when the meanings are similar (Thomas, 2006, p. 241). Appropriate quotations that convey the core themes or essence of a category are extracted for inclusion in the analysis section (Thomas, 2006, p. 242). This informs the development of a theory or hypothesis, which will be central to my study conclusion and recommendations. Note that data was aggregated during analysis and none of the major participant demographic facets (e.g. gender) proved divergent in theme emergence and formation.

Analysis

Introduction

Throughout the analysis process and after further review, five major themes emerged from the study data.

- The value of habit: why creating routine and having a mediated experience matter

- The value of longitudinal relationships: time in natural landscapes and enabling experiences

- The value of early exposure: natural spaces and experiences

- The value of noticing: micro to macros observations and reflections of changes in landscape and self

- The transformative effect of time in nature: changes in self

These provide grounding for discussion and synthesis as I seek to address the question: how might an individual's deeper relationship to place become a catalyst for positive change?

The Value of Habit: Why Mediated Experiences Matter

Study participants were recruited through various outdoor organizations and as such a higher frequency of engagement in their specific place was presupposed in the interviews. However, the dynamic of mediated experiences was varied: from slow hikers to downhill mountain bikers, trail runners to rock climbers. The velocity of the experience was dramatically different across participants, suited to variables such as time, intention, capability, and terrain. Two consistent and contingent sub-themes emerged from this overarching motif: having an activity one loves to do is in itself fulfilling and will thereby draw one back into the place one loves to do it over and over again. This is the creation of the routine, a pattern of experiences which not only accrue through the years, but deepen and compound, revealing new insights and spurning new reflections. As Jim explains, "when I'm out with friends who I've spent years hiking

with, talking about politics, literature, geography, history, whatever... there's a deeper sense of

conviviality from being together in clean natural spaces, much more than if we'd been inside."

For Jim, hiking not only mediates his experience with the natural environment, it also

provides a kinetic social connection bolstered through the bioaesthetics of the setting. This is

the exponential value of his routine; exercise, connection to the natural world, and

developing/maintaining meaningful relationships informed by the somewhat-ephemeral dynamic

of being together outside.

For Jesse, a hiker and person with mental health considerations, the routine of visiting

her local greenspace acts as an important complement to other self-care activities in her life. It's

much more than just the physical engagement of hiking, with the opportunity for serendipitous

moments of joy through an unexpected insight or experience with the natural world: "exercise in

nature is almost like medication. You get a good workout and feel accomplished, and you might

see something amazing on top of that." Jesse values the cumulative impacts of this time outside

in motion and as such has built enabling patterns, going so far as to move to a neighbourhood

within walking distance of their preferred greenspace.

Similarly, Holly emphasized how while sometimes they did not necessarily want to go to

the effort of gearing up and getting out, the payoff was always worth it: "Sometimes I'm not

really looking forward to the activity... But once you're out there, you connect with nature, you

feel a sense of accomplishment. It's so much better than the same amount of time spent

scrolling your phone or watching TV." Holly also spoke of how their love for the activity

(mountain biking) created a drive for improvement in their skills, the collateral benefit being

repeat engagement with the usual setting for riding. This has resulted in her deeper familiarity

with the nuanced dynamics of the landscape: "I was staring at a tree trunk and noticing the other

life growing out of it, and this may sound a bit flakey, but I was overwhelmed by this sense of

smallness and how I fit into things."

For Hank, climbing provides a mechanism through which to break the grips of workaday

existence and its inherent artificiality and stimuli:

> When you're out there climbing, you're really peeling away the day to day, and you're
> connecting back to something basic as a species when you're doing something as
> simple as touching a rock. There's a dynamic in that interaction, and I'm learning
> something about myself through the act of climbing.

Raymond, also a rock climber, concurs: "[climbing] just recharges me... When you can turn off

all stressors and the baggage that we carry day to day... I feel like it gives me a nice

perspective, the weight is lessened. A bit of clarity to cut through the noise."

For all participants, the medium—the activity—is the core driver for their ongoing

relationship with a select place. It is an enabler and an anchor. Dedication to the pursuit may be

the conscious act forming routine, but secondarily is the context in which it is situated: the

natural environment close to home, and the sense of place which comes through time and

pattern. As Val eloquently states, "walking is a pace at which you notice something new every

time... the changing of the seasons, the migratory patterns of the birds, the fluctuation in the

weather. It's an intimacy with my local scene. It's a personalized connection which helps me feel

grounded, less isolated."

**The Value of Longitudinal Relationships: Time in Natural Landscapes Through Enabling
Experiences**

Following logically from themes of mediated experience and the impact of routine, the

hour over hour, year over year engagement in outdoor activity in a select greenspace inevitably

forms a deep relationship which may be considered longitudinally. As Harold explains regarding

the years spent hiking the park system close to his front door, "all this time spent in the parks is

like ever deepening circles... I'm always finding new ways to explore and the experiences make me feel like the day counts for something." Paul's perspective aligns, stating "we have these amazing wild spaces and I want to know what it can offer, I want to feel like I'm an expert on what's in my own backyard. It's given me a feeling of deeper connection and investment in my local area."

Study participants widely noted the incrementalism of the relationship; how true depth to the relationship requires an investment over time, and the continued return of committing to the practice. Some participants view themselves as an active participant with another engaged subject—the land itself. As Kelly notes, "something I've learned through the years is when you go to a place on the earth, it wants to get to know you, but it won't reveal itself fully for quite some time. But the more times you return, the more you will learn... It's a deepening experience." Kristen concurs and adds that through repeated interaction with the same place, you 'widen your eyes'; that is, gain new abilities to see and understand in novel ways, experiences and understanding which differs from the normative modes of everyday life at work, school, home, etc: "I think these many years of experience and these different ways of learning and knowing, all this time has shaped a point of view where I have wider eyes, and so I see a lot of things, things you might otherwise miss."

Another subtheme uncovered through examination of the substance of this long-term relation includes empathy; through time, one may break down the artificiality of the human and nature dynamic, and come to see oneself within nature, contrary to dualistic socialization and dominant modes of extraction, exploitation, and waste. As Erin notes, "all this time spent in the park has really taught me how compassionate I am for nature, in a world where a lot of people aren't… You leave behind the greed and see yourself on equal footing with the natural world."

Finally within this theme area, a sense of acceptance emerges, an understanding of being part of a system much bigger than oneself, more than the sum of its individual parts. While many participants expressed the pain that the degradation of the natural world makes them feel, there's also an understanding of resilience and scale, of the temporary nature of our human incursions and their effects. In Hank's words, "I've learned life will continue, whether I'm here or not. That teaches me to be a balanced person, a loving person, through the vast beauty and finding the connection between ourselves and the natural world."

The Value of Early Exposure to Natural Spaces and Experiences

This theme emerges from two dimensions, based on firsthand experiences of participants growing up in tune with the natural environment and second-hand observations of youth in their lives. Participants' lived experience aligns with established research on the value of time in nature in children's cognitive, physical, emotional, and spiritual development (Charles & Louv, 2009, p. 4). Mary draws a direct connection between this early immersion in the natural world and her lifelong conservation efforts: "Growing up as a free-range child with a sense of marvel, when you're connected like that, you know you belong. And then you'll endeavour to protect it." Raymond, a parent, notes how important creating opportunities for his children to experience nature is to his sense of values and balance he's attempting to provide: "being outside is where we're supposed to be. When you're in the natural cycle, in the elements, you're the most alive, you're not distracted by everything else around you. Without this we lose sight of our dependence on these networks and drift further away from ourselves."

Kelly, whose work often involves youth, explains the innate connection she perceives through the ease of their interaction with the environment: "The children, when they come on to the land, they understand these things easily, because they don't have the filters yet. They know how to listen and be present to everything, to slow down and be with the forest." And this may

have a ripple effect in one's life, potentially subversive and counter to the dominant culture. Kristen further elaborates: "developing your curiosity and getting to share it with others, asking shared questions, this goes against what we're told to do, to hurry up and get on with daily life."

Fundamentally, the value of this early exposure resides in building a bond prior to the conditioning of artificial environments and our institutional education. When one enjoys unstructured time in the natural world early and often, the foundation is created for a more rich, layered, and reflective relationship through adulthood. As Erin succinctly puts it, "I felt connected with the forests in my backyard very early on, and since then they've always been a part of me."

The Value of Noticing: Micro to Macros Observations and Reflections of Changes in Landscape

This theme emerged from one of the richest areas of inquiry through the study: an interrogation of the value of 'noticing.' While a somewhat abstract and subjective area of exploration, findings clearly reflected the great pride, joy, and satisfaction participants feel from what they observe at all scales of detail through their long relationship to a place. Many noted that adroit 'noticing' is something that comes through time and practice: "noticing is a learned skill... from spending most of my life out here I've been able to see the details in a more focused way, and catch things that are different or unique" (Holly).

Beginning at a micro-scale, participants feel a powerful closeness to place through capturing the small aesthetic details in the mind's eye:

> I'd hope all of this gives you a greater appreciation for the simpler things. Watching a hummingbird zipping around a Mahonia bush... it's something we need to think about, how closely connected we are. (Jeremy)

> The years of being outside have taught me a lot about the power of observation... the simple things, like the sun glinting through the moss hanging from a branch, or the contours and myriad colours of an Arbutus tree. (Harold)

Many participants are able to seamlessly shift and intersect scales up to the macro, commenting

on the wider lens that the relationship to place has provided, in understanding both external

(place) and internal (self):

> You realize change is a very slow process when it's natural, and when it's unnatural it can be very quick and dynamic... When you're somewhere on a regular basis you pick up the hints of how it's slowly changing around you. The environment changes in a slow way, and I change along with it, at the same pace. (Hank)

> I'm trying to lose myself, to lose self-consciousness. To just be immersed in being there, in being present. To notice the scent and the smell. It's a sense of being connected with something much bigger than myself, a higher sense of self. (Raymond)

While most participants perceived an implicit value in the intentional acts of noticing, the

question remains: why notice at all? When engaged in an activity in motion outdoors, one must

be purposeful in the practice of observation and translating these inputs into insight. This has a

direct effect on conservationist tendencies in the face of climate crisis, and an understanding of

one's irreducible connection to the land through the strength of relationship:

> The more you see, the more you care about it. If you don't know it exists, how are you supposed to care?.. you can't change things you're unaware of, and so for me, I want to notice everything. (Jesse)

> I've learned the environment is fragile, and we need to protect it, and we need to connect to the land to do that. (Pamela)

The Transformative Effect of Time in Nature: Changes in Self

The final theme to emerge from the study is the ontological shift which occurs following

time spent in the natural world. Studies have demonstrated that physical activity in natural

environments is more restorative to the individual than the same activity experienced indoors

(Barton et. al., 2012). As well, "it is well established that exposure to nature leads to positive

mental health outcomes and cognitive, affective and behavioural changes" (Barton et al., 2012,

p. 90). The findings here both validate and supplement previous research on the value of

physical activity in nature with a more subjective, spiritual shift to accompany the established,

interconnected benefits to physical and mental health. With regards to the spiritual dimension of

time in natural spaces and its after-effects, Kelly states,

> When I'm on the land I can get into a completely altered space... it's a big opening. When I come away from it, I'm reminded what a lifeline it is for me, to be in nature. We're all so much better balanced in our lives if we spend that time exploring the spiritual dimensions of our place in nature.

> Pamela, less inclined to metaphysical reflection, nonetheless acknowledges a tangible

and transitory ontological shift upon returning from time outside: "When I'm back from a hike I

have a fresh view on the day, it releases something inside of me. I feel more relaxed and

ready." Jim, an academic, echoes this sentiment regarding lucidity:

> I'm a lover of trees and water, I need to see these things to feel fulfilled... They help me to resolve issues in my mind, when I'm in these natural environments… My thoughts become clearer and I'm able to think through what I'm trying to deal with. I become more crystalline.

Key to the spiritual dynamic of this theme is the rootedness in place, per previous themes in

these findings. Some participants seemed to emphasize the relationship with their primary

greenspace as material to the feeling; like visiting an old friend, a return to a familiar setting fills

them with a sense of meaning and positivity. However, participants widely noted a sharp drop-

off to this altered state upon returning to the built environments and technological mediation of

their daily life. As Riley illustrates, "sometimes the transition can be sharp, when you're returning

back to the workaday world... like stepping out of a warm sauna into 50 below. You can lose the

sense of transcendence pretty quickly."

That time in the natural world was universally experienced by participants as positively

affecting their state of being is no surprise; after all, why venture out in the first place if it didn't

make one feel better afterwards? Notable to this theme area, however, is the lingering sense

that the good feelings—the emotional benefits of movement in the outdoors, of the acuity, of the

spiritual fulfillment—are enhanced through the repeat engagement, or habitual pattern, with the

greenspace in which they've built the relationship over time and carry a deep familiarity. And

how might this influence the person's engagement with the wider world? As Jeremy explains:

"You get out there, cut the distractions, look around and breathe... It's phenomenal for your

health... If you can find a love for that habit, it'll make you healthier and happier, and those kinds

of people are more inclined to do good things."

Conclusions

Introduction

This section will transition from analysis of study themes to associated reflections, conclusions, and recommendations. While the first concern of the discussion is to pose policy recommendations which are impact-focused at the appropriate jurisdiction, some insights from analysis are better applied at the personal level as they fall outside the scope of state influence in Canada. It is worth noting the dominant Western sociopolitical ideology of liberal individualism and its constraints. Resistant to perceived state overreach and ingrained in the popular consciousness,

> Individualism is a purported feature of the cultural and attitudinal landscape of modern Western society. The claim that a culture of social independence is a distinctive and perhaps regrettable aspect of modern Western life has been a favourite of social critics since (at least) Tocqueville (Bird, 2004, p. 4)

The codification of liberal individualism in our legal and policy frameworks across municipal, provincial, and federal jurisdiction demarcates the realm of what may be considered 'personal' recommendations, no more substantive than (subjectively) good advice. While my preference would be for a state apparatus which may be more interventionist in its ability to affect holistic citizen health outcomes, the study aims to be pragmatic in its conclusions, and as such will only offer policy ideas when relevant and actionable. Correspondingly, these recommendations widely focus on the individual as the unit of change, given the prevalence of the 'social contract' in contemporary Western society (as associated with the theories of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Spencer, and others). This has led to what we label 'social atomism,' which suggests that social order is brought about through the free negotiations of autonomous persons seeking to advance private interests (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). This atomization lends itself to a first focus on the ability of one to change themselves. While the broader goal remains collective, emancipatory

transformation, I believe the realpolitik of the contemporary neoliberal order is best optimized for emphasis on the individual.

With pragmatism as the foundation for the scope of policy recommendations, I will argue what might be perceived as incremental change towards societal transformation. Pragmatic thought is grounded in the rich philosophical tradition of Pierce, James, and Dewey, and challenges common philosophical positioning that our practices are insufficient for the challenge, and that they must be bolstered through some principle or position that lies beyond, in the abstract. It does this while also avoiding the conservatism which posits that our practices are beyond reform. It is resolute and takes the minutiae of our lives seriously (Bacon, 2012). As Dewey notes, pragmatism "makes action the end of life" (p. 4).

The impetus for grounding recommendations in frames that are actionable in society *as it exists* is that our Western normative mode of culture/nature dualism *exists*, today—and must be overcome through an immediately actionable set of projects. As governance think tank CitizenLab states, "Incremental change attempts to solve problems with small, systematic steps that provoke change over time. By using incremental means, a government can reduce the risk and focus on trying to improve the system they already have in place, rather than starting from scratch and creating a new one" (2019). Challenging, changing, and ultimately transforming our collective relationship to the natural world might index us towards sustainable or regenerative ways of being. The pragmatist assesses the crisis, visceral and omnipresent, mired in a world in which movement towards radical transformations is often violently suppressed through the status-quoism of the ruling class. In this era of dominant capitalist realism—a theory coalesced by Mark Fisher in his 2008 book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*—it is prudent to apply a theory of change that is actionable within the context it is necessarily situated.

The Value of Habit

First, an important delineation between habit and routine. Habit goes to the active practices of our daily life, intentional engagement with the materiality of existence, and "should no longer be taken as the rut of dead routine, but rather as open to the acting subject's reflection—even during its occurrence!" (Kilpinen, 2012, p. 46). A routine is more descriptive of detached actions—the commute to work, brushing one's teeth, the ring of the alarm clock at a predictable hour. Many participants shared a similar pathway to their established outdoors habits; experimentation with a variety of pursuits, eventually finding the one they connected with most, often through both the personal gratification and connection to a community with shared values and interest. This, in turn, leads to the accumulation of experiences, resulting in what one would call 'habit'—an acquired mode of behaviour that comes to define much of one's image of self-in-the-world. And as Reay (2010) notes, habit (via Bourdieu's *habitus*) may be a "compilation of collective and individual trajectories" (p. 434). That is, generalized patterns at the level of society and more complex, unique practices at the level of the individual. So it is here, with overarching contemporary socio-cultural norms of outdoorspersonship especially prevalent in British Columbia, yet manifest in specific and personal habits by the individual.

Given the immense value that the individual's outdoors movement provides to them, from holistic health benefits (Gladwell et al., 2013) through a deeper connection with the natural world, it follows that this may also be the case for others who do not currently hold these established habits in their lives. The inference and recommendation is for individuals to try a wide variety of options for engagement with greenspaces. Structurally, this could manifest as the educational system providing more outdoors education options which are movement-oriented. The current grade 11 outdoors education curriculum in British Columbia expects the following relevant learning outcomes from students:

- the health benefits of outdoor activities;

- First Peoples traditional practices and ecological knowledge related to activities in the

  local environment; and

- the role of environmental awareness and stewardship in outdoor recreation and

  conservation (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2018).

While these outcomes further the end of a holistic outdoors experience, they are still delivered through the dualistic ideological foundation of established Western education. To achieve the end of helping connect students with movement practices that nourish the spiritual life and help advance an immanent relationship with the natural world, schools might offer more unstructured or loosely facilitated outdoor experiences with an accessible and supplementary philosophical toolkit. That is, movement is a medium, situation within the natural world is the absolute context, and the experience and reflection therein is the value, in motion; process as result, perpetuating and compounding. It is worth noting that study findings indicate the velocity of the activity (speed, e.g. hiking vs. running) did not have an effect on the participants' depth of relationship with place. Relationship is not contingent on detail, which may be more impacted by the variables of speed and time. Relationships form through exposure across scale; therefore, running downhill enveloped in the macro of a place may build bonds in the same ways prolonged focus on a singular detail might also. Therefore, for students, all activities offered through transformed outdoor educational programming might achieve the desired outcomes.

For adults outside the reach of compulsory education, the opportunity for direct state intervention is virtually non-existent. Those who enjoy the practice of greenspace experiences may only provide an example—evangelization may result in change resistance, which can be defined as conduct which serves to maintain the status quo, to mitigate perceived loss and avoid the unfamiliar (Coghlan, 1993, p. 10). The study findings indicate that people have to *want*

a new experience. Foucault refers to this self-constitution as *subjectification*, using the techniques and practices available to the individual while under the influence of myriad factors outside their control (in this study, settler-colonial culture, the climate crisis, etc). Kelly (2013) writes "the answer to the question of subjectivity relates fundamentally, as a discourse, to the social practices by which subjectivity is constituted. What we take ourselves to be, then, affects who we are" (p. 515). People need to discover the enabling conditions for that experience themselves. The intangible to the creation of habit is love—one must feel an authentic, driving motivation to return to ride to the forest, to hike to the peak, to climb the cliff.[1] External influences will never provide the requisite inspiration from which to establish a personally transformative practice. The will to grow and change must come from within, and once this codifies as practice the impacts carry beyond the simple act of doing. This is Foucault's *technologies of the self*, through which "the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion" (Kelly, p. 517). Though again, the subject operates within context, not purely self-creating, influenced by cultural, societal, and social forces.

The Value of Access

Making substantive time in nature and enabling experiences—the foundation from which long-term relationships might be built—approachable to the general populace requires ease of access. A guiding principle from the City of Victoria's Parks and Open Spaces Strategy (2017) is "to improve parks for all residents, particularly those who are currently underserved" (p. 71). Subsequently, "as the population increases the pressure put on existing parks will increase. New park lands will need to be acquired to meet increasing demand" (p. 72). This study focused on greenspaces that are primarily accessed through vehicle travel to and from. I strongly

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[1] There is an ableism and privilege to this statement as it presupposes a certain body and ability.

encourage both individual municipalities as well as regional and provincial governments to

continue expanding local parks and greenspace networks. The CRD frames the endeavour in

the regional parks strategic plan 2012—2021 as such: "the challenge is how to build and

manage regions within nature, rather than in opposition to it... these parks improve, protect and

sustain a healthy natural environment and contribute immensely to the overall wellbeing and

health of people" (2012, p. 38).

      Ease of access remains the primary barrier to the development of long-term

relationships with local greenspaces. In the Capital Region, only 11% of the landbase is user-

accessible parks and protected areas (CRD, 2012). This is insufficient for a rapidly growing

metropolitan region with a trajectory of sprawl over density; Portland, Oregon, for example, has

over 18% of its land base reserved for greenspaces. As well, 90% of their population is within a

10 minute walk to a park (Trust for Public Land, 2021).

      A critical aspect of the relational challenge is also the epistemological disconnect

inherent within the Western urban/nature divide. Environmentalists and philosophers have

grappled with this reframing for decades; as Stan Rowe puts it, "not only are we in the Earth-

envelope, we are parts of it, participants in it, born from it, sustained and reproduced by it. To

really grasp this symbiosis is to change radically our appreciation of humanity in the world"

(1990, p. 5). Not everyone will have the time or resources to travel by vehicle to the more

traditionally perceived 'wild' spaces in the region; we will need to start to think of ourselves as

within nature wherever we are, and as parts of the Earth-envelope, even within the construct of

the city. This requires a relationship with place; the ecosystems of one's own neighbourhood, to

commune with the flora and fauna of the boulevard, the vacant lot, the small urban park. Unless

we see 'nature' in the wildflower emerging from the crack in the sidewalk and understand our

biological connections, the conditions are not in place for Western society to build the kind of

meaningful, sustained relationships with the natural world surfaced in this study, and the potential for transformative effects which follow. As William Cronon writes in his essay *The Trouble With Wilderness*, "idealizing a distant wilderness too often means not idealizing the environment in which we actually live, the landscape for better or worse we call home" (1996, p. 85).

The Value of Early Exposure

The value of early unstructured exposure to natural spaces was widely noted throughout the study as an important gateway to the value-seeking behaviors enabling long relationships with certain special places, as well as the attendant epistemological foundation for a more holistic way of knowing oneself in/as the world. Thankfully this is already a large area of research with work such as *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Louv, 2005) gaining widespread mainstream attention and acclaim.

Outdoors education programs—beyond the athletic/recreation focus which has traditionally defined the curriculum—are booming in the Capital Region. Thriving Roots Wilderness School is a Saanich-based educational institution whose mission is to "provide outdoor education experiences that enable students to develop strong roots in connection to nature, community, and self; discovering what it means to be truly human while bringing our unique gifts to the world" (2022). The Victoria Nature School is an early education 'forest school' promoting regenerative sustainability in their programming, as "instilling responsibility in our children is vital to forging a more sustainable and respectful living philosophy. Children who recognize the connection between themselves and nature will be inspired to be good stewards of our planet" (2022). This multidisciplinary pedagogical approach to early learning structuralizes much of the findings from this study.

The value of this approach has appeared in the public education system as well, with select schools offering explicitly nature-based education curricula. Strawberry Vale (BC School District 63) states that "by repeatedly engaging students in the natural world around our school and using hands-on, interdisciplinary, place-based and project-based approaches to learning we can provide students with meaningful, relevant, and imaginative learning opportunities that also develop an appreciation for the natural world" (2022). However, funding for programming has been fraught, with School District 61 (Victoria) cutting the hugely popular nature-based kindergarten offering in 2017 after 4 years, even though parent demand far outstripped availability (*Times Colonist*, 2017).

I would encourage the provincial government to expand funding for outdoor education curriculum, programming, and resourcing, allowing a much wider range of youth to be connected to the outdoors as part of their public education. Racialized and low-income families typically face much higher barriers in accessing and resourcing outdoor recreation and education (Harrington et al., 2017) and must be a focus of these efforts. Create just and inclusive frameworks that ensure all school age children are provided frequent, consistent, and varied access to greenspaces as part of core curriculum. This year-over-year investment in youth education (and health) will provide equitable access to greenspace in both structured and self-directed ways, bolstered by both practical skills instruction and useful theory. This early rooting in place lays the foundation for lifelong relationships, both to the natural world and to one's own self, as part of the web of life.

The Value of Noticing

What may be understood as 'reflective practice' varies considerably across different epistemological traditions (Finlay, 2008, p. 1). However, most definitions frame it as a process of "learning through and from experience, towards gaining new insights of self and/or practice"

(Finlay, 2008, p. 2). The kinds of 'noticing' identified through this study are active forms of reflective practice; intentional engagement with the materials of the experience and a contextual analysis of what these details—both micro and macro—'mean' across a variety of spectrums. This includes to self, to ecosystem, to society, etc. But can this form of intention be taught? To suggest so would assume that reflective practice can be reduced to a legible set of skills and abilities; however, the insights shared by interviewees suggests a high degree of subjectivity to their experiences, so far as to be ineffable. What is noticed and the reflection/synthesis/action cycle this catalyzes is personal, complex, and opaque; there is no linear/mechanistic 'practice' that might be authentically codified, shared, and applied. To simply say 'slow down and smell the roses' does a disservice to the cumulative impacts of intentional observation specific to place over time.

Conclusions here again fall into the realm of personal choice; that one might cultivate a reflective practice which may advance a more persistent and strengthened *mindfulness* during both time in nature as well as 'the rest' of life. Mindfulness, defined as "the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us" is thought to reduce stress, enhance performance, gain insights and awareness, and deepen our understanding of the world (Mindful, 2022). Shapiro et al. (2006, p. 375) propose three basic axioms for mindfulness: intention, attention, and attitude. Interviewees generally displayed a high degree of all three attributes, especially with regards to intention and attention. Attitude—that is, mindfulness for its own sake, as a disposition and purpose—was often implicit in intention, but not explicit to the motivation and experience.

Figure 1

The three axioms of mindfulness
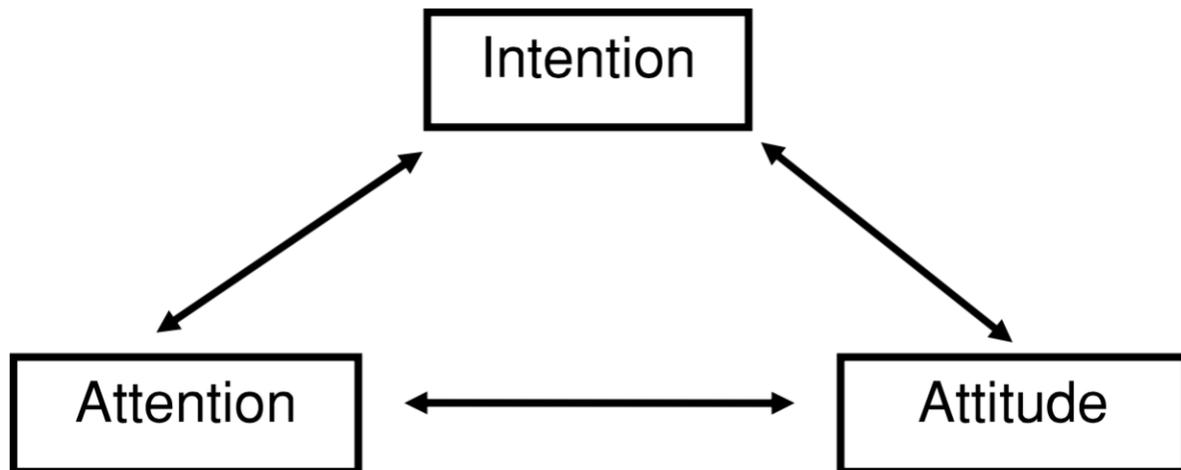
Note. Intention, Attention, and Attitude, are not separate stages. They are interwoven aspects of a single cyclic process and occur simultaneously. Mindfulness is this moment-to-moment process. From "Mechanisms of Mindfulness" by Shapiro et al., 2006, *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 62(3), p. 375.

To say 'one should be mindful as to absorb more of the world and understand oneself' is hardly a novel recommendation, bordering trite; from the ubiquity of meditation smartphone apps to the mainstreaming of yoga, the mindfulness zeitgeist is an omnipresent part of contemporary western culture. This does not diminish its potential value or impact. However, the personal subjectivity of the endeavor and its outcomes requires a parallel subjective engagement through a cycle of experimentation, reflection, and incremental change. The study bore witness to the internal growth and expansion of interviewees through stories of how they got *here*; new internal horizons, perspective, ethics, accountabilities, and truths. I propose that intentionality in one's interactions with the natural world is a reflective practice accessible to all; to see interdependence with all living things, a mirror revealing, rife with insights if one is open to them.

The Transformative Effect of Time in Nature

Most participants noted a tangible ontological change upon returning to the built environment after spending time immersed in greenspaces. As Riley states, the (re)connection with that which is uncontrolled or manipulated by humanity "is a reminder of humility, of the magic and grandeur in the world." However, there seemed a distinct half-life to this altered state before returning to familiar patterns of artificiality; the endless scroll, the fragmenting of attention, the persistent multitasking. How might one sustain this new mode of being, and how might it advance a larger sociopolitical transformation? One may be tempted here to recommend a swift and final rejection of the baggage of modernity: wage labour, mandatory consumption, the race to the bottom of capitalism and its enabling neoliberal theology. This revolution seems improbable in the short term. The conflict and juxtaposition seems to be between the expression and realization of self-directed time in nature and the hard edges of one's life which is otherwise. Tactically, the recommendations are again personal, as the state and private sector are not incentivized to provide more unstructured space in our lives outside the grips of capital and its demands. The scale of 'personal' might also include forms of voluntary collective identity, e.g. the associations from which research participants for this study were selected. There is an element of self-selected peer pressure to these associations, for as Tina Rosenberg argues in her book *Join the Club* (2011), our careful curation of peer groups ends up heavily influencing our shared language, behavioural norms, cultural consumption, and our overall axiology and expectations from life. And this, when scaled past the discrete group, can create massive impacts on society.

There is a strong alignment with the inclination towards reflective practice outlined in the preceding section. To lengthen and retain the perceptible change in oneself following time in nature, it would seem one must be actively engaged in holding on to the distinct and positive

emotions; the new knowledge and the pleasure (the afterglow) of experience. Given the overwhelming positive emotions associated with interviewees' greenspace experiences, it stands that the retention of this state is in itself the goal. Kawas and Corrada (2018) note that while "positive mental attitude," "psychological well-being," "life satisfaction," and "happiness" are vague concepts, research suggests that they are associated with better health outcomes (p. 1). Better health enables one's ability to 'be the change' through thoughtful, sustainable ways of being and knowing. One might seek to identify and name the feelings they carry home, the lingering sense of connection and satisfaction, the innate meaning, the motivation to justice-oriented behaviors and ecological balance. Through rendering these feelings legible one might create a taxonomy and trace cause and effect. One might apply rigor to the practice, scale, and evangelize. This again goes to the subjectivity and butterfly effects of the individual's attempts to remain becoming, to live in the grace granted to oneself following time connected to the living world; what transformations might peace and gratitude catalyze, and how might this help navigate the world towards restorative and regenerative modes and norms?

Conclusion

This study explored nebulous, interconnected, and consequential questions of epistemology, ontology, and axiology within the bounded space and context of the Capital Region of British Columbia. The history of the place and our situation within crises of our own making are inescapable in considering our relationship to natural systems and how we might break the hold of a deeply rooted dominant paradigm.

When conceiving this study, I aspired to inspiring, actionable findings which seamlessly translated to pragmatic public policy-oriented outputs. However, the vastness of the terrain foreshadowed its conclusions: a mix of the personal, social, and political, prodding at the

confluence of how we learn, know, and in turn, live. The overarching takeaway from the study is that we must transform our normative relationships with the natural world, to overcome the pervasive dualism which subconsciously influences the substance of our everyday lives. That love for something relatively approachable like a park might enable this should be motivation to strive for what it represents, the intrinsic and enduring knowledge of kinship that comes from a deep relationship with the natural world. This process asks much of us as individuals and the systems in which we live, but it is the work of transition and survival, of re-futuring through levers ethical, political, social and ecological.

As with much in our exercises of becoming, the value was found in the process, personal growth through working with the inspiring interviewees, the review of the supporting literature, and the analysis and reflection of what it can and should mean. I wish for this work to live in the 'real' world, to provide even the smallest useful insight at this time of upheaval. To provide hope and direction as we gaze to the horizon, dreaming of a better shared existence on spaceship earth.

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Appendix A

Ethical Approval

Leslie King <Leslie.King@royalroads.ca>   Sun, Oct 31, 2021, 11:11 AM   ☆   ↩
to Liton, Kevin, Ann, RRU-SES, Gina ▾

Dear Kevin, on behalf of the RRU research Ethics Board, I am pleased to let you know that your request for ethical review for your MEM thesis work has been approved conditional on you fixing your responses to questions 7 and 17. Since you do have both a consent form and an interview guide, please indicate that and that they are attached and resubmit your request. Good luck with this very interesting study. Cheers, Leslie

Leslie A. King (she/her) PhD MCIP
Professor and Director
Canadian Centre for Environmental Education

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LIFE.CHANGING

Royal Roads is located on the traditional lands of the Xwsepsum and Lekwungen ancestors and families.

Appendix B

General Interview Guide

Relationship to Place as a Catalyst for Regenerative Communities
Interview guide
Kevin Ehman Sept 2021

Interview setup

Interviews will be conducted via video conferencing using Zoom. Participants will be sent a meeting invitation including a link prior to the interview.

Note: This document is not a set script, it simply acts as a prompt to ensure that the primary research questions are asked. Follow-up questions (e.g. 'Why?') are not included here and are at the interviewer's discretion to ask.

Introduction

I'm a student and researcher working on my master's thesis through Royal Roads.

About this project

Why I'm speaking with you:

I'm talking with all types of people who are actively engaged with parks and other green spaces in the Capital Region. I'm looking to learn more about the kinds of things that foster a deeper connection to place in people and build relationships with the land. My thesis work aims to produce theories and policy recommendations which can promote more regenerative ways of living in our urban environments, informed by the insights gathered through these interviews.

If there's anything you don't want to answer, just say so and we'll move on. You can also stop the interview at any time.

How your information will be used/kept private

Everything we talk about will be kept anonymous. That is, while I know your name as you have told it to me, I won't record it in my final notes and won't include any of your personal information.

A. **Opening questions**

- Please tell me a bit about yourself

    ○ Where you live, what you do for work, etc

        ■ How did you get involved in [organization XYZ]

B. Context and Place

- How did you pick up [hobby / outdoors pursuit XYZ]?

- How many days a week do you find yourself at [place XYZ]

    - What is it about this place that 'connects' with you?

        - [ask about interviewee definition of 'connection' via last response]

- What is it about [hobby / outdoors pursuit XYZ] that fosters this connection?

- What do you notice when you're out there?

- Do you feel any different here than you do at home or going about your day-to-day life?

    - Why is that?

- What are the poignant things you've learned through your time in this place?

    - What lessons has this place taught you?

    - How, if at all, has the time spent out here enriched your understanding of this place?

- What do/would you tell others about what you're doing out here, beyond [the activity they do]?

Wrap up

- Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

- Do you have any questions for me?

- Thank you so much for your help. I'll be back in touch when my thesis has been successfully defended to see if you'd like a copy.

Appendix C

Consent Form

RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

My name is Kevin Ehman and you are invited to participate in my research project, **Relationship to Place as a Catalyst for Regenerative Communities**. I am a Master's student in the School of Environment and Management at Royal Roads University.

The purpose of my research is to better understand what fosters deeper relationships to place. This project is sponsored by Dr. Ann Dale, Director of School of Environment & Sustainability at Royal Roads. You may verify the authenticity of this project by contacting Dr. Dale: Ann.Dale@royalroads.ca

Your participation will consist of an approximately hour-long casual interview. We'll have a conversation about the natural spaces you frequent, feelings associated with those places, and how this may influence other aspects of your life. Findings will be shared with Royal Roads University in partial fulfillment of my Masters of Arts in Environment and Management.

The research results will be published in public outlets, including my thesis that will be published in RRU's Digital Archive, Pro-Quest and Library and Archives Canada. The results might also be disseminated at public and academic conferences and presentations. You may also be provided a copy if you're interested!

There is no risk to you in participating in this research. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. Similarly, if you choose not to participate in this research project, this information will also be maintained in confidence.

Please note that your valuable ideas and opinions will appear in the report itself. However, no personal information such as your name or personally identifiable information will be used to attribute those comments to you. All documentation will be kept strictly confidential.

Interviews will be conducted remotely. Data may be stored on or accessible by servers in the United States and may be subject to examination by government or law enforcement under the Patriot Act. While this likelihood is small, I am required to let you know this possible risk.

The data gathered will be retained until the successful defense of the thesis, stored on secure drives by the researcher. It will be destroyed following the thesis defense. Data will not be retained pertaining to an individual who has withdrawn at any time.

This research project has been approved by the RRU Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at ethicalreview@royalroads.ca; 1-250-391-2600 ext. 4425.

By signing this letter and/or replying affirmatively to this email, you are indicating your agreement to participate in this project. In doing so, you are not waiving any legal rights. Please advise if you have any questions about the above.

Name: (please print):

_____

Signed:

_____

Date:

_____

Appendix D

Sample Email

[Date here]

Dear [**Prospective Participant**]**,**

I would like to invite you to be part of a research project that I am conducting. This project is part of the requirement for a Masters Degree in Environment and Management at Royal Roads University. My name is Kevin Ehman and my credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by contacting Dr. Ann Dale: Ann.dale@royalroads.ca

The objective of my research project is to better understand what develops and deepens a person's relationship to wild places in the capital region district. This research is part of my thesis at Royal Roads University in partial fulfillment for a Masters Degree in Environment and Management.

My research project will consist of a series of interviews with outdoors communities in the capital region. Each interview is expected to last about an hour. We'll discuss things like natural spaces you frequent, your history in those spaces, feelings associated with those experiences, and how this may influence other aspects of your life. Your name was chosen as a prospective participant because of [**association with outdoors organization XYZ**]. Please note I do not have any pre-existing ties to **[outdoors organization XYZ]**

Our Research Ethics Board requests that we highlight key points such as potential and anticipated risks, confidentiality, anonymity, and procedures of withdrawal. For more information please review details outlined in the Research Consent Form, included with this invitation.

If you would like to participate in this project, please contact me at:
Kevin Ehman

Thanks in advance, Kevin Ehman