

Healthy Lakes and Vibrant Economies: *Linking History, Sense of Place, and Watershed Protection in the Belgrade Lakes Region*

by James Rodger Fleming

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Using interviews, targeted questionnaires, and historical documents, James Fleming and Erin Love show how history and “sense of place” can help encourage individuals to support environmental protection. The project they describe focuses on watershed protection in the Belgrade Lakes region of Maine, and is part of a larger Sustainability Solutions Initiative project in that region. They argue that “connection to place leads to caring about it.” 🐟

Sense of Place is the kind of knowing that involves the senses, the memory, the history of a family or a tribe; the knowledge of place that transcends single generations and looks to the future—Wallace Stegner

When does place become more than a backdrop for our lives? How does a landscape take on personal significance and even ultimate meaning? How, by sharing our sense of place within a supportive community, can we enhance stakeholder engagement and connect what we know—both intuitively and through organized study—with what we care about deeply? The answers are varied and worthy of reflection. What we know about a place connects us to that place and provides motivation to protect it.

Sense of place involves our sensibilities, the collective memories and history of a family, a tribe, a region; it generates both knowledge and traditions that transcend the generations and shape the future in meaningful ways. Artists, historians, scientists, and poets can invoke this in memorable ways. So, too, can everyone bear compelling public witness to both personal and shared sense of place.

Sense of place links tangible elements of the natural and the built environment with memories, emotions, narratives, rituals, values, and sensory perceptions. If you think about the house that you grew up in, you're not going to think about just the physical location, you're going to think about all your childhood memories from that house. They will come flooding back to you. In this way sense of place is a holistic impression that you get when you think back to a time in your life, a place in your life and the people in your life.

The formulation of a sense of place is not a lone endeavor. As we visit, remember, revisit, and live in the important places in our lives, our sense of place is articulated through shared experiences and in dialogue with others. How we remember a place, how we live in a place; how we take responsibility for a place; and how we build and empower community in a place contribute to a fluid, continuously reconstructed, and continuously evolving sense of place.

Maine's Sustainability Solutions Initiative (SSI) aims to advance economic and community development

while protecting the environment. Colby's project focuses on the science and the stakeholders of the Belgrade Lakes. Specifically, the SSI team is studying the effects of development on lake-water quality and local economies in the Belgrade Lakes region, an important economic engine in central Maine, encompassing 180 square miles in 13 central Maine towns with seven major lakes totaling more than 19,500 acres of surface area. The overall project is focusing on a widespread and difficult problem: phosphorus pollution from development and other human activity. (See article by Peckenham et al., this issue, for additional information on the overall Belgrade Lakes region SSI project.)

The Colby History and Sense of Place team is part of this larger project and seeks to define, create, and share a useable past and a sense of place for the Belgrade region that can also serve as a model for stakeholder engagement elsewhere, even beyond the state (Schnettler 2010; Westhafer 2010).¹

One of the main focuses of this SSI project is knowledge-to-action, or encouraging people to act effectively to protect the environment once they are supplied with relevant knowledge and can connect it to their sense of place. Our techniques aimed at accomplishing this include textual, archival, and oral history; targeted questionnaires; and community conversations about sense of place that build identity and resiliency in the face of mounting local, regional, and global economic and environmental challenges. These various modes of concept exploration, data collection, and presentation allow people to reflect on their own experiences and share them. We have done this at the Maine Congress of Lake Associations, at the Belgrade Regional Conservation Alliance, and at national meetings of the Geological Society of America and the American Society for Environmental History (Love, Fleming and Rueger 2011). If this work sounds like a high calling, it's really made of ordinary, everyday stuff, with individuals building on the foundation of their personal sense of place in support of coordinated group efforts responsive to pressing environmental needs.



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Some early results of our interviews with members of the greater Belgrade community have led us to several conclusions.² Sense of place often reaches back across the generations. Dianne Oliver, owner of Day's Store grew up right here:

I've always lived in Belgrade Lakes, all my life, and I've always been right at this store. It was my grandparents', then my parents', and now mine and my husband's.

We asked, "How do you see Day's Store contributing to the character of the Belgrades?"

If it's good for the Village, it's good for Day's Store. If it's good for Day's Store, it's good for the Village. . . . The slogan that the whole region uses is "Where Memories Last a Lifetime," and I think that's true. I think we're part of a major memory people have when they come to the area here. . . . Sometimes we're the first place they stop, even before they go to camp.

Bear Spring Camps, Rome, on the shore of Great Pond's North Bay has had summer cabins for rent since the days of E. B. White. We asked the owner, Peg Churchill, about her guests' senses of place. She responded, *For a lot of them, it's more home than home.* One regular camper, Lisa Boyer reinforced this sentiment, posting on her web site, "a summer without Bear Spring Camps isn't really a summer at all" (pubpages.unh.edu/~lav592/mysummers.html).

Others, with equally deep commitments arrived in the area much more recently. Pete Kalin, executive director of the Belgrade Regional Conservation Alliance and an ESPCoR partner, moved here in 2006. He told us,

As hard as I work, I can't save the lakes by myself. I have to get other people to help me save these lakes. . . . One key thing is getting people to realize that their personal participation and action will make a difference.

Sense of place can provide a rootedness and a field of action in which individuals can truly make a difference, rather than just fretting about large-scale problems. Maggie Shannon, executive director of the Maine Congress of Lake Associations is concerned about global environmental issues, but focuses her attention

and energy on state and local issues where she can truly make a difference:

I don't obsess about it. . . . but I am fundamentally distressed about the condition of the world's ecology/ecosystem. . . . It's a deep anxiety. . . . I can't do very much about the polar bears, but I can try to do something about this corner [of the world], which seems to have so far escaped.

Rick Watson, president of the North Pond Association, did not set out to be its president, but made his commitment based on his childhood sense of place:

There, behind my cottage, were hundreds and hundreds of acres of woods all the way into Norridgewock, and at that time, you did not need permission from the landowners, so I grew up hiking and biking and camping and all that with friends that I made up and down the lake.

Rick's commitment to place, formed in childhood, has continued to grow along with his responsibilities:

People. . . don't think their 50-foot-lot or 100-foot-lot impacts the lake, and you know, maybe it's septic, maybe it's runoff, maybe it's the driveway. . . all that matters.

Nevertheless, there are challenges in developing a shared sense of place for a region as large and as diverse as the Belgrade watershed. Nan Mairs, president of the Belgrade Historical Society made this clear in her interview:

There are advantages [to having a single, agreed-upon identity] because everybody will work together better if they have a unified hope or dream for their town. . . . But I don't know whether people are too independent to set aside. . . the trivial things they don't agree about to really focus on the important question, "Where do we want to go from here?"

Where we go from here is to initiate more conversations within the community that have the potential to reach across the state and beyond.

The stakes are high. Polly Beatie, president of the Belgrade Lakes Association, attended Camp Runoia as a child and later moved permanently to the region:

If the lakes fail, the community will fail. Or at least it will change in a way nobody really wants it to.

She noted that many factors were involved in motivating people to take action in their communities, especially with regard to environmental issues, but pointed out that the SSI project was making a real difference:

Colby brings a sense of urgency and importance to what's happening here.

Connection to place leads to caring about it. Connection also leads to knowledge of not just where we are but who we are. We can reflect on our own sense of place through memory and share this with each other through conversation. We can then move toward a communal sense of place that can serve as the basis for future action. We should all be involved in protecting environments, and in changing attitudes, and in building community. We are charged with pooling our talents—scientific, literary, artistic, organizational, communal—to provide the Maine lakes with the sense(s) of place they deserve. 🐟

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ENDNOTES

1. For more information on Colby College's History, Geology, and Sense of Place Team, visit the web site: web.colby.edu/senseofplace/2011/07/
2. Interviews with Polly Beatie, Peg Churchill, Peter Kalin, Nan Mairs, Dianne Oliver, and Maggie Shannon were conducted by Erin A. Love in July and August of 2011.

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