

THE SENSE OF PLACE RESEARCH APPROACH TO FORESTS

RANTAŠA B.

Wageningen University / Ghent University

Corresponding author e-mail address: bojan@rantasa.net

ABSTRACT: Gieryn calls for a new approach to analysing place [5]. He encourages researchers to indulge themselves in a more visual approach, one that combines maps, photographs, landscapes, etc. and not being limited to mere significance testing of variables [5]. In the paper I take this challenge to explore what could this new approach to research on sense of place be. I make an analysis of the forest related literature that discusses the sense of place. Most scientists make attempts to predict sense of place, reducing it to e.g. attachments and satisfactions related to forests, in order to develop measurable, manageable concept for forest planners. Practitioners ask for people's feelings and try to interpret the geography and the spirit of the place in its complexity. I conclude the paper acknowledging that there is an abundance of approaches to the research on sense of forest place. However, using the words of Lefebvre we still do not have a perfect understanding of the cause and effect in place making [12]. I identify the unique lived experience of people at the centre of sense of place making and invite researchers to make an approach to an understanding of sense of place with the reason, senses and feelings.

Keywords: place, forest, sense of place, research, practice, approach

1 INTRODUCTION

In the scientific forest literature there have been calls for inclusion of sense of place in forest planning [29]. However this has not been done so readily [22]. The reason to this slow inclusion of sense of place in forest planning has been argued that it is due to the issue that most research results are qualitative, while forest planners want hard statistical data [22], [23]. Yet, if we are to build *forests for people* (1), managers should adapt their management practices to a more human understanding. On an event 'Towards the Sustainable Use of Europe's Forests – Forest Ecosystem and Landscape Research: Scientific Challenges and Opportunities, Farcy noted the need for forest planners to change their traditional practice of wood management, and to take into consideration more dimensions, the social and natural diversity in specific [3]. Sense of place could be that additional dimension and provide the link and understanding for reaching the objective of forests for people. As Williams and Steward say: 'That [sense of place], in essence is, the central objective of natural resource planning, and it may be the only genuinely integrative approach to managing ecosystem.' [29, p.23]

The issue that poses many concerns in sense of place research and application is: How to analyse sense of place? Various calls have been made in this relation [5], [9], [22]. At first hand it seems that the issue is not whether a quantitative or qualitative analysis should be made. Stedman in his call for more quantitative research to forests still recognizes the importance of having qualitative research on sense of place [22]. One needs an in depth qualitative analysis before a quantitative analysis can be employed [1], [11]. Yet, researchers can be divided between quantitative analysis proponents and qualitative analysis proponents. But, there is one thing that researchers agree upon, and that is that sense of place is a complex matter [5], [9], [21], [22], thus my question here is how we should approach this complexity.

Gieryn [5] understood the complexity of analysing sense of place. Gieryn, makes a bold move and calls for a new approach to sense of place [5]. He encouraged researchers to indulge themselves in a more visual approach, one that combines maps, photographs, landscapes, etc. and not being limited to mere significance testing of variables [5].

'Maybe a place-sensitive sociology is not a set of empirical findings at all or even a distinctive kind of explanatory model, but rather a way to do sociology in a different key—a visual key. [...] What I lacked were tools to analyse place in its given two and three dimensions. I am a victim, perhaps, of trained incompetence in a discipline that cultivates statistics and words as means to grasp the social. Sociologists could become more adept with maps, floor plans, photographic images, bricks and mortar, landscapes and cityscapes, so that interpreting a street or forest becomes as routine and as informative as computing a chi-square. That visualizing (I think) is the next step.' [5, p.483]

This call, in its essence, is a call for a qualitative approach. Yet, it is an approach that requires great openness from the researchers' side when approaching sense of place. I believe that this openness is key in grasping the complexity of sense of place. And this is the issue that I intend to elaborate, as the visual key would require combination of methods that otherwise may not be used. To take a quote from Patrick Keiller's film, an exploration of place: 'Robinson believed that if he look to the landscape hard enough it will reveal to him the molecular basis of historical events and in this way he hoped to see into the future' [19]. Though in a symbolic sense, this is that visual approach that Gieryn calls for [5]. But the issue is whether it is present in the forest related literature.

In this paper I take this challenge to explore what could this visual approach [5] in research on sense of place be. Therefore, 1. I look into the current research approaches in the analysis of sense of place of forests; 2. I look into the practices of analysing sense of place by practitioners; and lastly 3. I conclude this paper with a call to researchers of sense of place.

2 SENSE OF PLACE IN FORESTRY

2.1 The approach of scientists

The recognized complexity of sense of place has compelled researchers to analyse sense of place in a qualitative manner. However this approach has been regarded as wrongful in the context of forest planning [22], [23]. Stedman says that forest managers require measurable elements: 'One cannot "manage for sense of place" or integrate it into resource planning unless its

particulars are known, as well as the process by which it is created.' [22, p.827]. Therefore to satisfy traditional forest planning practice, sense of place is being measured and statistically treated [22], [23]. This approach and understanding originates from the history of scientific forestry (2). Scientific forestry was designed for control of the resource for central (state) planning seeing the forest in a utilitarian way, through the availability of wood, and stripped from any other social or natural values [20]. In this relation, scientific forestry '[...] has relied more heavily on conventional positivistic science and its hypothesis-testing approach.' [22, p.824]. The consequence of this is that statistical measuring of sense of place in order to be managed. However sense of place is a human dimension, and measuring variables on sense of place is as close as explaining the forest landscape through the average wood mass of the plot. Or to take a thought by Scott on the abstract measurements, it is like explaining books in kilograms [20]. Not impossible but at least questionable.

Due to this argument on traditional forestry, there is a tendency for quantitative research to be conducted in relation to sense of place of forests. Though not neglecting the importance of qualitative research in Stedman's call [22], researchers may be inclined to go directly to quantitative research, thus skipping a process of understanding the sense of place and any possible issues that may be hidden.

Looking at the forest related literature is evidenced that the quantitative approach has more and more presence [22]. The sense of place is been treated in variables that express: rootedness [15]; attachment to place [10], [28]; attachment, identity, and dependence [8], [9]; characteristics of the environment, human uses of the environment, constructed meanings, place attachment and satisfaction [22]; etc. We can not say that one quantitative approach is more dimensional than the other since the elements of sense of place remain to be discussed and treated differently by different researchers and or scientific disciplines [27]. In quantitative approach to sense of place attempts to portray the complexity of sense of place is being made and improved over time [9]. The question that I find more important to this is whether the selection of elements or dimensions of the sense of place are appropriate for that place. An information that should be sought through a qualitative exploration. However, hardly any literature combines both quantitative and qualitative approach to the research of sense of place.

The limitedness of employing only quantitative research is portrayed on a research on lake side owners, where the results exhibit variations (in e.g. lake importance) of unknown origin that compels the scientists to speculate on the origin of this variation [9]. Thus, the important aspect of understanding the complexity of issues that hide in the landscape is missing from this research. 'A general critique of all of these quantitative studies, and key to this effort, is the unsatisfactory relation between the literature they cite and the questions they examine empirically. Typically, the literature review sections of these studies adequately represent the complexity of place concepts, but the quantitative applications are often quite narrow, failing to incorporate the theoretical complexity into actual measures and hypothesized relationships. Measurement, even that which explores the potential multidimensionality of place concepts such as attachment, has been narrowly focused on the sense of

place concept itself (e.g., describing higher or lower levels of place attachment) rather than examining factors that may produce attachment, or the effects of attachment on other variables.' [22, p.825]. And Stedman continues: 'Thus, I assert that important thematic areas of sense of place theory, [...] have not been adequately tested in quantitative research approaches.' [22, p.825]. Stedman thus sets the question on 'How can we examine the multidimensionality of place in a manner consistent with theory?' [22, p.825]. But is it the theory that has been missing in quantitative research or is it the lack of information that would be gathered beforehand in an explorative, qualitative research? We researchers should not simply go about '[...] counting and measuring before we truly understand underlying meanings that would help identify what we should be counting or measuring' [11, p.463]. Since qualitative approach should provide the knowledge what to quantify, I would add that there is no quantitative approach that can replace a qualitative approach in the analysis of sense of place.

The other side of the coin – the qualitative research is not missing from forest related literature on sense of place. It has been noted that qualitative research has been dominating in the past as a way to understand the complexity of place [22]. The qualitative approach, unlikely the quantitative, does not treat but a few dimensions of the sense of place. Qualitative research focuses to illuminate or develop new insights. As in the case of quantitative, qualitative research is in process of finding the right approach. 'Momentum around place research is connected to the development of effective and illuminating qualitative research methods and increasing acceptance of these methods.' [30, p.858]. Yet, the interview, whether structured or open, remains as the sole method of gaining the information sought [1], [30].

As seen so far, the scientists' approach in researching sense of place has been very rigid, and in a sense is lacking that visual approach. But where would we be able to find use of 'maps, floor plans, photographic images, bricks and mortar, landscapes and cityscapes' [5, p.483]? Recent research suggests that incorporation of spatial aspects of sense of place should be done [7], [9] is along side Gieryn's call for a visual approach [5]. "In this way [by incorporating spatial aspects], a more comprehensive understanding of places might be attained than if one were to operationalise sense of place as it has been described in the literature." [9, p.326].

At this point it is worth mentioning the work of Studley in the region of Eastern Kham [23], [24]. In the seven years long study Studley made an anthropologic, quantitative research, though combined with qualitative research, on forest values [23]. Studley used several methods to quantify indigenous forest values: text analysis for forest value identification, multidimensional scaling for the cognitive mapping of forest values, geostatistics for forest value distribution, and boundary analysis for changes in forest values and their coincidence with cultural or biophysical phenomena [23]. In this process, Studley [23] extracted dimensions of the indigenous sense of place, embedded with the local meaning, believes, cults and senses [23], [24]. But to do this he underwent a careful and diligent process in identifying the values and developing customized methods to measure them in a way that is appropriate to the local understanding. It is perhaps this multilayer approach that we should embrace in combining qualitative and quantitative with spatial aspects.

But what about photographic images and landscapes? Are they to be treated merely as artistic forms in place related science? If we are to look at paintings, Malpas vividly explains this with the case of Hobart, a town in New Zealand: 'The significance of the work undoubtedly derives from the all encompassing view of early Hobart and its immediate surrounds that the painting presents to the viewer, as well as the record it provides of the town at this point in its history. It is through its presentation of this view that the work contributes to the sense of the town's history and identity.' [13, p.3]. As Merifield would say, place is a constellation of social elements at a point in time [16] which is comparable to a painting, as described by Malpas [13], or even a photographic image. Or on the other hand, without going in to the depths of the discussion of the dynamism of place, the image can be evidence to the dynamic character of place [14].

2.2 What about practitioners?

Unburden with the rigidity of the scientific method, practitioners have the opportunity to experiment and employ methodologies that may bring innovation to the approach in researching sense of place. Though there are not a lot of practitioners that employ sense of place in their planning, there are a few that they do. Their methods are qualitative and do combine visual aspects.

A development group from the USA, Regenesys Collaborative Development Group [17], [18] employs a mixture of exploring the geographical characteristics of a location with people's stories of that place. They interpret the geographic landscape and the spirit of the place in order to provide guidance for the landscape planning they make, which will fit to the place.

Though not related to forest planning practices, other, innovative approaches to analyse the sense of place by practitioners are coming up which may be used in forest planning as well. An example is of an urban planning consultancy from Scotland that was asked to develop new design of a school. In their practice they used stakeholders' consultation workshops and asked people how they feel about the school space [2]. A different approach is by an architect from the USA who puts his clients under hypnosis to draw out of them the sense of place they want and need [6].

The examples from practitioners shown above come down to a common feature, and that is that sense of place can be represented through the emotional reasoning of people and combined with visual – spatial aspects. However, the use of these approaches by scientists may be limited. Since science is dominated by rational thought – logic, emotions are suppressed. This suppression of emotions – the human dimension, can lead to non-working solutions [26] in the same manner as the sense of place is often left out from planning and leading to results that do not fit the place or even alter or destroy the place itself [4].

It is interesting to see that though some scientists consider that planners or better say practitioners need hard statistical data for the results of studies on sense of place to be incorporated for their management [22], [23], practitioners themselves employ many, different, innovative and quite unusual qualitative methods on exploring sense of place and using it in their plans. However, the greater question regarding the above examples is about the validity of these methods. As Lefebvre says: 'Even neocapitalism or 'organized' capitalism, even technocratic planners and programmers,

cannot produce a space with a perfectly understanding of cause and effect, motive and implication.' [12, p.37]. And this concern is not limited only to practitioners, but also to scientists that research sense of place. This statement [12, p.37] should not discourage people to explore and use sense of place in their work. It should be taken as an awareness notice to be more critical in the efforts to research and employ sense of place.

3 CONCLUSION

The examples I have portrayed of scientists' and practitioners' approaches in researching sense of place express an abundance of approaches. Whether that they are quantitative or qualitative they may tackle but a few elements [8], [10], [15], [21], [28], or make attempts to approach comprehensively to the sense of place [1], [9], [30]. It seems that the visual approach in researching sense of place may better be found on the practitioner's side [2], [6], [17], [18]. While scientists are limited in combining methods, the work of Studley [23], [24] and his multilayered combination of qualitative and spatially determined quantitative approach should be noticed. As this multilayered approach with spatial aspects could be that visual approach. Though, with a down side of being of long duration.

Perhaps I could add an advertising point by Rory Sutherland: 'When you place a value on things like health, love, sex and other things, and learn to place a material value on what you've previously discounted for being merely intangible [...] you realize you're much, much wealthier than you ever imagined.' [25]. In forest planning this valuing could come from the inclusion of sense of place. Knowing that all values are subjective [25], and to that matter is that even sense of place is subjective. It is our perception of an outsider that is the source of misconceptions [20], [25] to the analysing of a very human dimension – sense of place. Keeping in mind that analysing sense of place is complex and therefore is hardly likely that with certainty can predict how we can manage it [12, p.37] we should primarily embrace the basic aspect of understanding it and respecting it. Thus, we researchers should find ways to employ multilayered approaches that combine qualitative and quantitative analyses. We should use our reasoning, common and scientific, all our senses that we as humans have, but also our feelings, and engage our selves with the landscape in order to bypass that position of an outsider and grasp the sense of place in order to portray it to its detail. Turning sense of place research into an exploration that goes well beyond the scientific skills of applying precision methodology.

4 NOTES

- (1) Forests for people – the theme of the International Year on Forests, 2011. The aim was to highlight the relationship between people and forests, and humankind's role in ensuring the forests well-being and development.
- (2) The origin of scientific, or also referred to traditional forestry, is in 18 century in Germany, and very soon after in France. It appeared as an answer to the State's needs for control of the resource – the availability of wood. For more details see Scott (1989).

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