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# The Politics of Place: Understanding Meaning, Common Ground, and Political Difference on the Rocky Mountain Front

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**ABSTRACT.** A major challenge of forest policy and management is effectively understanding different people's viewpoints on natural resource use and conservation, and how those viewpoints contribute to conflict and conflict resolution. In response to this challenge, the concept of place is gaining currency in natural resource research. The study of place promises an integrative approach to understanding people's relationships with particular areas. Realizing the potential of place research to inform forest policy and management means conceptualizing place as an arena of shared *and* contested meanings. A politics of place is attentive to different and potentially conflicting meanings, and how senses of place may be connected to larger political struggles. This study examines people's images, values, and interests with respect to the Rocky Mountain Front in Montana. In this case study, discourse about place-names provided a window into the politics of place. Results illustrate the ways in which place meanings are connected to people's ideas about property, conservation, and governance. Knowledge of the politics of place can inform forest policy and management and contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of natural resource conflict and the potential effectiveness of decision-making processes. *FOR. SCI.* 49(6):855–866.

**Key Words:** Natural resource social science, natural resource policy, sense of place, forest planning, environmental discourse.

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**R**ECENT FOREST MANAGEMENT EFFORTS have emphasized collaborative planning, processes that focus on civility, dialogue, and building common ground (Wondeleck and Yaffee 2000). While these processes have potential to produce meaningful public involvement, innovative solutions to difficult forest issues, and enduring management plans, conflict in the natural resources arena remains. In 1986, Allen and Gould predicted that forest management decisions would become increasingly wicked and complex. Forest issues continue to be contentious, and improved scientific understandings do not eliminate important differences in people's perspectives on what forests are nor how they

should be managed. These differences mean that forest areas are often hotly contested, making forest management, in a word, political. Rapid social, economic, and demographic change in many rural areas means increasing diversity among forest users and local communities. Meanwhile, the growing emphasis on ecosystem management requires that managers work with private landowners and multiple stakeholder groups.

The ongoing political tumult of forest issues is evident in recent controversies over the spotted owl in the Pacific Northwest and fire in the Northern Rockies. Disputes over the North Woods in Maine and the Headwaters Forest in Northern California indicate that forest politics are not limited to

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public lands. While ignoring the political dimension of these issues might be tempting, politics cannot be disconnected from natural resource management. According to Cortner and Moote (1999):

Just as the biophysical world is the basic component of natural resources, politics is the "stuff" of people interacting with each other, their environment, and government institutions, all of which affect nature greatly. Resource management is, at heart, a very political process. All too often in the past we have tended to separate politics and resource management. (p. 1)

Moving from contentious debate to effective policy and management requires understanding the complex, and often political, relationships that people have with particular areas. The study of place has the potential to provide this understanding.

The study of place has become important in a number of fields, including anthropology, geography, sociology, environmental psychology, and natural resource management. Place is geographic space with particular meanings to particular people. Williams and Stewart (1998) define sense of place as "the collection of meanings, beliefs, symbols, values, and feelings that individuals and groups associate with a particular locality" (p. 19). Place is created through the use of cultural symbols that bestow and convey meaning (Greider and Garkovich, 1994). Interactions between individuals result in social understandings of place. These social meanings define and frame environmental issues and biophysical locations. The meanings of a particular place, or place meanings, are conveyed and created through discourse. Discourse is more than just language. Discourse is a coalition of meanings, "a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices through which meaning is given physical and social realities" (Hajer 1997, p. 44). Place meanings may be part of broader discourses and, hence, may provide windows into the ideas and interests connected to these discourses.

In the natural resources arena, attention to place is motivated by a desire to replace mechanistic, reductionist, commodity-oriented social science with more holistic, integrated social assessments (Williams and Stewart 1998). Place research responds to the problematic nature of previous natural resource policies, revealed in conflicts like the spotted owl crisis in the Pacific Northwest. In the case of the spotted owl, the conflict was most often characterized as a collision between conservation and livelihood, represented in the slogan "jobs versus owls." Livelihood was seen as the domain of the local community while conservation existed elsewhere, presumably in urban centers. This characterization of the conflict reduced a complex social landscape to a dualistic, commodity-oriented disagreement. However, researchers who examined the relationship between rural people and the place they lived found different dynamics at play. In southern Oregon, for example, low income residents saw the spotted owl as a symbol of the changes brought by newcomers who had different values and customs (Brown 1995). Loss

of jobs was important, in part, in the context of reduced access to fishing, hunting, and berry picking on private lands. For these people, the spotted owl had less to do with the actual biological conservation of the forest and more to do with social and material changes taking place in their communities. The ability of conservationists to enforce different values through federal land management policies was emblematic of newcomers' increasing control over the future of this particular place. Carroll (1995) also found that the spotted owl controversy was, in part, a cultural battle. He points out that policy initiatives focusing on retraining and relocation failed to account for the ways in which workers were attached to particular places. Conceptualizing the debate over spotted owls in terms of jobs versus the environment limited our analysis of forest policy, and resulted in a failure to understand the nature of the conflict and the impacts of policy changes on rural communities.

A focus on place moves forest policy and management beyond the narrow confines of economic research by acknowledging the multiple relationships people have with geographic locations, relationships that encompass livelihood and economics, *and* values, symbols, emotions, history, and identity. Place research also encourages forest planning that is site specific and attends to local social and ecological contexts.

Momentum around place-based approaches to forest management is growing, and specific benefits have been postulated, including more efficient planning, ability to build on common ground, reduced conflict and litigation, and more enduring management plans. Place research is increasingly cited as an important component of ecosystem management (Eisenhauer et al. 2000, Schroeder 1996, Williams and Stewart 1998, Williams 1995). Many place studies explicitly link place meanings with management actions people want to see pursued in particular areas (see Schroeder 1996, Brandenburg and Carroll 1995). Brandenburg and Carroll (1995) claim that place research can assist public land managers in understanding different stakeholders and reveal voices and perspectives that are missed during traditional public participation. Research on sense of place might also illuminate areas of potential common ground that were not previously obvious (Galliano and Loeffler 1999). And, knowledge of the meanings of particular places may help managers to understand why specific proposals are contentious and when conflict might emerge (Greider and Garkovich 1994, Williams and Stewart 1998). Place research is believed to lead to more effective, more enduring land management that is "both ecologically sound and socially acceptable" (Brandenburg and Carroll 1995, p. 382). The recent development of USDA Forest Service planning protocols for sense of place indicate increasing interest on the part of managers to utilize place meanings in national forest planning.

Place research, like collaborative planning, promises to reduce conflict and move forest management beyond potential political impasses. However, to do so, place research must incorporate and illuminate forest politics. Realizing the potential of place, then, means conceptualizing place in terms of both common ground *and* political difference.

## The Politics of Place and Forest Management

Place research encompasses a variety of focus areas, including how environmental meanings are created through social actions (Gupta and Ferguson 1997), how attachments to localities contribute to identity formation (Tuan 1993, Williams and Carr 1993, Low and Altman 1992), the relationship between sense of place and environmental values (Norton and Hannon 1997), and how cultural symbols are connected to landscape meanings (Feld and Basso 1996). Researchers have also examined the role of place meanings in policy-making (Vandergeest and DuPuis 1996) and the implication of power, politics, and class in the place-making process (Soja 1989, Shields 1992, Harvey 1996).

Despite growing interest in this field of study, researchers are not unified in their approach to or definition of place. Some place researchers are overtly attentive to politics, difference, and conflict, while others focus more on commonalities. These divergences, described below, reflect different theoretical orientations and mirror broader trends across natural resource and environmental social science (see Belsky 2002). Researchers and decision-makers need to be aware of and upfront about theoretical differences and the assumptions that influence their research approach. In this paper we advocate for a politics of place approach—place research that is attentive to politics and difference.

In 1990, Kemmis used the phrase “politics of place” to describe the ways in which politics were situated in a particular landscape and influenced by that locality. Moore (1998) later defined “politics of place” as the process through which “particular territories are imbued with meanings, shaped by cultural practices, and reworked in the rough-and-tumble of rural politics” (p. 349). Place studies in anthropology, sociology, political science, and geography often explicitly examine the political nature of place meanings. Many researchers in these fields conceptualize place as contested terrain and focus on the politics of meaning (see Feld and Basso 1996, Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Soja 1989, Harvey 1996, Vandergeest and Dupuis 1996). According to Blaikie (1995), “landscapes and environments are perceived and interpreted from many different and conflicting points of view which reflect the particular experience, culture, and values of the viewer” (p. 203). Again, these views can be linked to broader constellations of meanings or discourses. Discourses involving particular places and place meanings are dynamic, continually created and actively contested, and not necessarily compatible. Sense of place and place meanings are thus political, based as much on difference as commonality.

In the natural resource arena, Williams and Stewart (1998) agree, arguing that landscapes have multiple meanings and that place meanings are politically contested. However, place research in the natural resources field often focuses on shared sense of place, common ground, and “likeness,” sometimes ignoring important differences and the ways in which place itself is contested. For example, leading research on place attachment, often cited in the natural resources literature, defines place in terms of shared meanings and symbols that are common to different people in a particular cultural group (see Low 1992). And, according to Galliano and Loeffler

(1999), “people frequently share a communal interpretation of place” (p. 6). While many researchers acknowledge that there may be winners and losers and that understanding sense of place cannot resolve conflict (Schroeder 1996, Galliano and Loeffler 1999), much of the natural resources scholarship on place shares an optimism that place research can provide a common ground that transcends conflicting interests. Where different interests are acknowledged, they are often simply noted rather than identified as sources of conflict. This focus on commonalities presumes that “likeness” or shared meanings are the salient characteristic of place.

Understanding the multiple meanings of place and how place is contested is important to forest management because place meanings are often connected to ideas about what is and is not legitimate use. In other words, a person’s sense of place is related to expectations or desires for that location, or what they believe is appropriate for that area. According to Vandergeest and DuPuis (1996), meanings are “more than just points of view” because people act on them and “in many cases they do so by trying to create, in the landscape, the concepts they imagine, talk about and write about” (p. 1). Cantrill (1998) argues that senses of place “are quite powerful in the generation of responses to environmental policies” (p. 303). Place meanings, then, are more than values, ideas, and images; people’s understandings of place are transformed into actions (Harvey 1996, Shields 1992).

For example, when people describe an area as a *timber town* or an *old growth forest*, their statements may reflect what they believe a particular place *should* be like, implying that certain activities, such as timber harvest, are or are not appropriate. These statements are part of discourses that convey place meanings *and* ideas about what is “right” or “desirable” for a particular landscape. Ideas about which management actions are appropriate inform positions on policy and management proposals.

Understanding sense of place as the intersection of both common ground and contested meanings complicates the application of place research in forest policy and management. If place is simply about shared meanings and common ground, research can easily be integrated into decision-making, provided it complements biophysical science and economic constraints. Place researchers who focus primarily on commonalities argue that we should manage forest environments for sense of place (see Galliano and Loeffler 1999). But, in the context of multiple and conflicting landscape meanings, there are many senses of place, leaving managers and policy-makers in the difficult position of having to choose or privilege one sense of place over another. If place meanings are assumed to be shared and are, therefore, institutionalized into policy and management, decision-makers could be unexpectedly broadsided by increased conflict and public opposition. These challenges point to the need for place research that recognizes both shared and contested meanings, without presuming the presence or absence of either.

The remainder of this article describes a study of place on the Rocky Mountain Front in Montana. Background on the study site and research methodology are followed by

three examples illustrating how the politics of place emerged from the research results. In the first example, shared and contested place meanings illustrate both commonalities and differences. In the second example, responses to questions about a seemingly accepted and innocuous place-name reveal complex differences in people's goals for the area. The final example demonstrates how place meanings are inextricably linked to broader issues of outsiders and newcomers, conservation, property, and governance.

### ***The Study Site—The Rocky Mountain Front in Montana***

The Rocky Mountain Front (also known as "the Front") includes forest, prairie, and alpine habitats east of the continental divide in north-central Montana. While definitions of this landscape vary, they usually include federally designated wilderness, roadless and multiple-use Forest Service lands, Bureau of Land Management areas, state game reserves, a Nature Conservancy preserve, large private ranches, and scattered rural communities. Timber harvest is minimal, and ranching is the predominant use of private lands. Resident communities are currently undergoing socioeconomic transitions common throughout the intermountain West. While the area is still largely undeveloped, there is a growing influx of quality-of-lifers, second home buyers, and wealthy hobby ranchers. This shift in demographics has ecological and cultural implications that include the subdivision of large ranches and loss of open space, population increases and cultural change, shifting priorities and pressures on public lands, and rural gentrification.

National conservation attention to the area has increased dramatically in the last 20 yr. The presence of the Bob Marshall Wilderness complex and abundant wildlife, including grizzly bears on the prairie, combined with controversial proposals for oil and gas development have piqued conservation concerns on public and private lands. The national profile of the Rocky Mountain Front is evidenced by several precedent-setting Forest Service decisions, including a 15 yr ban on oil and gas leasing, and a recent mineral withdrawal. Public land management agencies and conservation organizations are pursuing landscape level approaches and refer to the area as the Rocky Mountain Front. This setting provides an important opportunity for the study of place.

### ***Research Methods***

Momentum around place research is connected to the development of effective and illuminating qualitative research methods and increasing acceptance of these methods. Qualitative approaches allow researchers to access, describe, and analyze in-depth and complex place meanings. Qualitative methods, described below, were employed in this study to gain a detailed and nuanced understanding of people's relationship with the Rocky Mountain Front.

This article focuses on research results from phase I of a larger ongoing project. Phase I research was conducted in and around the communities of Choteau, Augusta, Bynum, and Dupuyer in Montana in June, July, and August 1999. During this time, the researcher conducted 34 interviews with 37

people (3 interviews were conducted with couples). Nonprobability purposive sampling was utilized to ensure that a range of viewpoints was represented in the sample. This sample is not random, and no claims are made about the distribution of particular perspectives in the larger population. Participants were purposefully selected from a list of over 100 people recommended by community members using chain referral methodology (Bradenburg and Carroll 1995). The researchers made efforts to include key decision-makers, community leaders, and potentially marginalized people, newcomers and old-timers, and different age groups, occupations, political perspectives, sexes, and ethnicities.

The goal of sampling in this study was not theoretical saturation. Rather, participants were selected based on their ability to represent a diversity of backgrounds and ideas. Interviews were conducted to gain an understanding of the major viewpoints and positions people hold in relation to the Rocky Mountain Front. The sample included 30 residents and 7 nonresidents. Residents included ranchers and other landowners, Forest Service personnel, outfitters and other forest users, community leaders, Nature Conservancy staff, private property rights activists, and conservationists (the term *conservationist* is used here to identify individuals who are paid staff or active volunteers with nonprofit environmental groups, while acknowledging that many other people might be considered conservationists, including ranchers.). Nonresidents included conservationists and state and federal agency personnel who live within 2 hr of the study site and whose work is related to land management and conservation in the area (see Table 1 for details on the sample).

Semistructured, in-depth interviews were conducted for approximately 50 to 90 min. with each participant (or couple). To ensure that interviews were systematic and allowed for meaningful comparison, an interview guide was used to initiate discussion of key themes and to focus each interview on comparable topics (Charmaz 1991, Kvale 1983, Patterson and Williams 2002). The interview guide included questions about participants' experience of the area, how they used different parts of the landscape, what the area meant to them, and what kinds of changes they had seen. Probes were utilized to obtain detail on particular topics and for clarification on confusing answers. While the interview guide assured consistency across interviews, participants also had opportunities to bring up topics and ideas that were not raised by the researcher.

All interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. Interview data was organized and analyzed according to significant concepts and themes (Fetterman 1998). A process of open coding requiring detailed organization of data and attention to emergent phenomenon was used. This analytical process links concepts and themes to data in a systematic evaluation and re-evaluation of the interviews (Strauss and Corbin 1990, Coffey and Atkinson 1996).

### **Results**

The three examples that follow illuminate different aspects of the politics of place on the Rocky Mountain Front. Particular interview quotations have been selected

**Table 1. Selected characteristics of the sample.\* N=37**

	Resident	Nonresident
Residence	30	7
Occupation		
Carpenter	1	
Conservationist		3
County Commissioner	1	
Forest Service	2	2
Journalist	1	
Lawyer		1
Nature Conservancy	2	
Outfitter	3	
Rancher	13	
Retired	2	
Teacher/local educator	3	
Trapper	1	
State fish and game		1
Writer	1	
Sex		
Female	11	1
Male	19	6
Ethnicity/Race		
Blackfeet	2	
European Descent	26	7
Mixed European/ Native American	2	
Length of residence		
Long-term resident (20 or more yr)	23	
Newcomer (less than 20 yr)	7	

\* The categories are based on primary occupation, how people self-identified, and residents' definitions of long-term residents and newcomers. All nonresidents were either state or federal agency staff, or active volunteers with or staff of conservation groups. These nonresidents all focus in part on land management and conservation in the study site. All nonresidents live 1–2 hr from the study site.

for use here because they represent viewpoints articulated by a subset of the sample. These quotations are presented as illustrative of larger phenomena uncovered by the research. In the first example, shared and contested place meanings are briefly described. The second example shows how different people hold different viewpoints regarding the place-name Rocky Mountain Front. The third example illustrates how landscape meanings are linked to discourses about newcomers, ranching, private property rights, and government. Each example illuminates different aspects of the politics of place on the Rocky Mountain Front.

### ***Senses of Place: Shared Meanings and the Emergence of Difference***

As predicted by many studies of place, a salient commonality among people interviewed was their attachment to and love of the place, especially the mountains. The Forest Service portion of the Rocky Mountain Front is commonly referred to as “the mountains.” A wide variety of people talked about their love of the mountains. Many residents who had moved away from the area for a period of time spoke of missing the mountains. According to a rancher and business owner, “when you grow up here, every morning you get up, you look at the mountains, see what the weather is doing. When you move away, there’s no mountains to look at.” Another rancher claimed that, whether they admit it or not, “locals” have an “attachment to the mountains.” Both ranchers and conservationists discussed the spiritual aspect of the mountains. Many different people talked about the beauty of the place, and some cited the wildlife as a special aspect of their experience. People described the area as “beautiful,” “spectacu-

lar,” and “magical,” saying they valued the place for its “scenic splendor,” “aesthetic value,” and “open spaces.” They talked about solitude, peace, and quiet as part of their experience of the area.

People’s actual use of the mountains varied widely, and activities could not be easily categorized according to obvious groups, such as residents and nonresidents, old-timers and newcomers, or ranchers and nonranchers. Many different people camped, hunted, fished, picnicked, backpacked, picked berries, horsepacked, and snowmobiled on the national forest. One business owner who grew up in the area described his experience of the mountains.

We love to go up there. We hike, we take drives and we comment every day we’re up there how beautiful the area is. Sometimes we sound like a broken record, but we still say it, we often talk about that. The sunset is different, the clouds are different, the animals react in different ways different times of the year. We see bear, deer, elk. We have everything up there.

Ranchers, trappers, outfitters, and conservationists talked about being close to nature. Even residents who never visited the mountains described an important attachment to that part of the landscape.

Ranchers were somewhat unique in that those with Forest Service grazing permits used the mountains for what they described as “livelihood.” Some ranchers without Forest Service permits were too busy during the summer to recreate in the mountains, or found more solitude on their own property. Many ranchers were deeply attached to their own property, as much as to the landscape as a whole. According to one woman the ranch is:

Almost a part of who you are...it's knowing every inch of that property and knowing where the soapholes in the pastures are that you don't want to ride your horse in. It's knowing your land as if you knew your home, 'cause your land is your home...if a bad windstorm comes through and knocks down a bunch of cottonwoods you feel bad. Not because those cottonwoods did anything for you, you feel bad because of the damage that was inflicted on the land....Your memories are tied to the land...you have your roots in the land and I don't know anybody who doesn't feel that way about their property.

Particular ranches were also significant to their owners because of family heritage and history.

Consistent with previous research, long-term residents focused more on the human community as compared to newcomers and nonresidents (Cantrill 1998). Nonresidents are defined here as people with a primary residence outside of the study site (in this study, all nonresidents were conservationists or agency staff). Newcomers are people who have lived in the study site for less than 20 yr (what most residents consider a newcomer) and long-term residents are those who have lived in the area for 20 yr or more. Long-term residents, both ranchers and nonranchers, tended to describe the area in terms of both the natural environment and human inhabitants. According to a local business owner who grew up on a ranch, "I treasure this area because of both the land, which is pretty much in good shape...and for the culture, the way of life" which she described as congenial, civil, open, and friendly. A man who grew up in the area and returned upon retiring said he missed "the people, the attitudes, the slow pace of life, and just the country itself."

When long-term residents described an inhabited or pastoral landscape, they often emphasized the importance of agriculture. One rancher defined the area by saying that "typically and probably the most long lasting is that we're an agricultural area, the agricultural industry, grazing basically, has been a way of life for a century or more." For ranchers as well as nonranchers, ranching culture and lifestyle was an important part of the Front. However, contrary to previous research, long-term residents' focus on the human community did not preclude attention to the natural environment, as demonstrated by the attachments to the mountains described above.

While nearly everyone interviewed described an attachment to the landscape, newcomers and nonresidents focused more on the wildness of the area, describing it as "wild," "raw," "pristine," "undeveloped," and a "huge expanse of wild country." The ecology or ecological uniqueness was also important to nonresidents and newcomers. These people described the area as "natural" and as a "wildlife sanctuary." One newcomer said he cares about the place because:

Where I grew up all the natural communities are basically gone. They don't exist anymore. And even where I went to school there's some prairie remnants, but, for the most part, natural communities as they were a hundred years ago don't exist anymore in that part of the world. And they do here to a limited extent. It's just kind of exciting to see a place that is still somewhat intact and has some potential to be a functioning landscape.

According to another newcomer, "a lot of this country's still as it was when Lewis and Clark came through 200 years ago." For these newcomers, the Front evoked images of past conditions that have been lost in other locations.

Nonresident state and federal agency employees focused on the wholeness of the landscape. A Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks employee said that they are trying to "hold the country together" and preserve the "connections between the high ground and the low ground." A former Forest Service employee said the area is "intact, its parts and pieces intact" and argued that we should treat the area as a whole.

For newcomers and nonresidents, history was also important. One newcomer describes his reasons for moving to the area.

What's important is quality of life and where I live...What holds me to this country is the history and the wildness of it, and I guess the romantic vision of the Montana West, not necessarily the cowboys and Indians, but just wide open spaces and freedom to move around and do the things I love to do outside. And I think this is one of the last places that's a symbol of that, that isn't yet discovered.

While long-term residents focused on family or community history, newcomers and nonresidents often emphasized archeological and paleontological history.

Different descriptions of this place, the Rocky Mountain Front, may be connected to people's goals for the area. Long-term residents may want to protect or create a working, pastoral landscape on the Front, while newcomers and nonresidents may want to protect or create a wilderness in the same area. These and other differences emerge in more detail in relation to the place-name.

### *It's All in the Name*

In the case of the Rocky Mountain Front, the politics of place was unexpectedly illuminated, in part, through questions about the origins of the place-name. The place-name Rocky Mountain Front is part of the discourse, or coalition of meanings, about the area. As such, this seemingly neutral and innocuous name triggered perspectives about the place as a whole. People's ideas about the origins of the name Rocky Mountain Front revealed differences in perceptions of outside attention as well as conservation efforts. This name came into common usage about 20 yr ago, although there was occasional use of the term "East Slope" or "Front Range" prior to that time. Historically, the Blackfeet called this area "the backbone of the world." The term Rocky Mountain Front appeared at the same time that the Forest Service was exploring the possibility of oil and gas leasing in the area, and when the Nature Conservancy purchased several ranches to create a large preserve. Most residents agreed that the term "going to the mountains" was used, and to some extent continues to be used, for the area now called the Rocky Mountain Front.

Many residents refer to the area by more specific place-names, such as Blackleaf Canyon or the South Fork, as opposed to using the term Rocky Mountain Front. A rancher and business owner who grew up on the Front said:

All the maps you see say Rocky Mountain Front and you see it in newspapers. Us locals here we have Ear Mountain, we

have Corrugated Ridge, we have Teton. We've got the name Sawtooth, we have names for certain mountains. But the media has called everything the Rocky Mountain Front and that's where that come from I'm sure. You know like everybody calls the wilderness, the Bob. Well, I've never called it the Bob in my life. Are you going to Cabin Creek, are you going to Gates Park or going to the Chinese Wall? You know, that's coming from different people than the locals. Nobody ever called it the Bob.

There was general agreement that the term Rocky Mountain Front was created and popularized by people who did not live in the area, most likely conservationists. It followed that how people felt about the origins of the name was related to their perception of conservation efforts and groups as well as their perception of outside attention. Long-term residents, newcomers, and nonresidents who were sympathetic to conservation efforts claimed that the term simply developed during the oil and gas leasing controversy and that it fit the area aesthetically since the mountains seem to thrust up in a front.

However, to some long-term residents, the name symbolized unwanted conservation and outside attention. An elderly trapper from the area said of the term Rocky Mountain Front:

That was concocted by some of these people that were sitting there in the cities in the big easy chairs, wanting all the whole area clear out here to the front as the wilderness. But do they take care of it? What good is it? Outside of a few people that could either hike it or hire horses from a pack outfit to go see the country. And what good is the wilderness, they've outlawed all logging, all mining, and so on. You can't use it.

The conservation agenda that this man associates with the place-name is clearly different from his own. However, even some conservation-oriented long-term residents resisted this externally imposed identity for their home. A rancher whose family homesteaded in the area, who self-identifies as a conservationist, "trusts" the Nature Conservancy like a "neighbor," and has a conservation easement said:

It's a new word, and I'm against a lot of this change and that's change, so. It's a new word and it bothers me. I guess it's the attention-getter. I don't like all the attention that's being given to the so-called Rocky Mountain Front. I guess it's just the publicity that goes with it.

A mixed Native American and European-descent man, who is also proconservation, argued that:

This Rocky Mountain Front, East Slope, things like that, that's just a baby name. I don't know exactly how that really for sure got started. I can tell you it wasn't by the native people. That got started by newcomers coming in here and all of a sudden they named this or that. I've seen this happen with a lot of things around here. New people will come into this area and all of a sudden, in about 2 or 3 days, they know all the history, they know everything that went on around here. Well, there's no way they can, and when they tell people and talk about things they don't really go by the respect of the elders and what have you in the area, they just start naming something something. Then all of a sudden everybody knows it by that name. But our old people, all they ever called this up here was just the mountains.

The perceived arrogance of "outsiders" appropriating place through naming, and the power of that naming angered some long-term residents.

The name Rocky Mountain Front, then, is more than a neutral referent for a geographical location. One resident argued that "when you get a name to a place it becomes an entity." The name, for many, is less symbolic of the actual physical space than it is for an externally imposed conservation agenda and the struggle over who controls this landscape. According to a Forest Service employee, there are people "that live here that don't even know the Front exists." These people are clearly familiar with the landscape, but may not be aware of the identity and particular goals for the Front popularized by some groups.

Resident's suspicions about the origins of the term were confirmed by nonresident agency and conservation group staff. Nonresident conservationists, and one woman in particular, who worked to prevent oil and gas development in the 1970s, was described by a peer:

They were the ones that started calling it the Rocky Mountain Front, it had been the East Front or the Front Range here and there, but they tried to bring [Rocky Mountain Front] into consciousness... She almost cried when she heard the weatherman call it the Rocky Mountain Front.

These conservationists were deliberately trying to mainstream the term Rocky Mountain Front in order to bring attention to conservation concerns in the area. They were attempting to give the area a specific identity, an identity associated with a set of values and management actions they were trying to promote.

Residents were not passive participants in this process. Resident conservationists used the notoriety generated by creation of the Rocky Mountain Front to push for changes in federal land management. They capitalized on the identity of the place in pursuing their own goals.

Other place-names, such as the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem or Crown of the Continent, which represent larger areas that contain the Rocky Mountain Front, used with increasing frequency by conservationists, biologists, and agency staff, were also brought up by residents as evidence of different political agendas for the area. One rancher pointed out that she was not "ignorant" and knew all about the Continental Divide Ecosystem and the Crown of the Continent. This did not mean she had finally realized her true location. To her these words represented a political agenda for a geographic location, not the geographic location itself. This rancher believed that conflicts over land use in the area were not about conservation practices on the ground, but that "it's all about who controls the land." To her, the political agenda represented by names like the Crown of the Continent was a direct threat to her ability to remain on her ranch, which she believed was coveted by conservationists and agencies.

In the case of the Rocky Mountain Front, a recently popularized and contested place-name revealed differences in how people defined the area, how they conceptualized other people's perspectives, and what was or was not desirable for the future. A place-name in this instance is more than a descriptive term for particular geographical space; it is also a political strategy conceived of and deployed by some and resisted by others. People realized that the identity of this place, expressed even subtly through a place-name, could

influence policy and management, thereby affecting future of the Rocky Mountain Front and the people who live there.

### *The Rocky Mountain Front as a Symbolic Landscape*

As described above, the place-name Rocky Mountain Front was, for some, a symbol of outside attention to the area and nonresident values and agendas. Because of the contested nature of the place-name, researchers asked a series of questions about “the area” before inquiring as to the origins of the name Rocky Mountain Front (although many people used the term Rocky Mountain Front of their own accord). Responses to these and other questions indicated that the landscape itself was symbolic of outside attention. Understanding different senses of place, then, required understanding what outside attention meant to people. In the case of the Rocky Mountain Front, place meanings and outside attention could not be separated from discourses about newcomers, ranching, private property, and the federal government.

Many people believed that outside attention was drawing in newcomers. Residents and nonresidents were both concerned about the aesthetic and biological impacts of the subdivisions these newcomers often purchased, and cited weeds, wildlife conflicts, water quality, and roads as potential problems. However, because long-term residents defined the area in terms of the natural features *and* the human communities, they also focused on cultural changes.

For example, newcomers were believed to restrict hunting access to their property and post no trespassing signs, which angered long-term residents who had different ideas about access and the permeability of property boundaries. According to an outfitter who grew up in the area:

A big piece of country over here was sold to a famous person. He had a lot of money, he came out here and he bought a beautiful piece of ground. And they're the ones that say "well, we're going to save this land" and the first thing they do is put up no trespassing signs...What they're basically saying is "I don't want to be a neighbor"...that changes the culture of the land.

Rising land costs and the escalating property taxes that accompany them were also a concern for many long-term residents, who were fearful that wealthy newcomers would drive up land values and displace middle class ranching families. One rancher said:

I'd like to see it just go back to where the land has a value that a man can buy it and make a living off it. With all these inflated prices that's happened in the last several years, why the common man's gonna be gone. It's gonna be either the rich guy or it's gonna be bought by conservation groups.

Some residents specifically blamed special designations on federal land, such as wilderness for subdivision and gentrification, arguing that the conservation spotlight was attracting people whose activities were colliding with ecological goals. Some residents believed this was intentional, describing the Nature Conservancy as a “sanctuary for the idle rich,” and arguing that conservationists wanted to get ranchers off the land so that wealthy people and tourists could come in.

Frustrations about outside attention to the area were often linked to concerns about attitudes toward ranching. As described above, ranching was an important part of the area for many residents, especially long-term residents. Ranching is also the predominant private land use and a livelihood for many landowners. Many ranchers argued that they protected the environment and were good stewards of the land. One outfitter who grew up in the area said “I would very much like to see the cattle ranchers still having control of the land, private family ranches. And to me that would be the best protection this country would have.” However, many ranchers believed that nonresidents, in particular conservationists, regarded them as “the bad guys.” One rancher said “a lot of people think we're really bad for the country,” and another argued that “the intent is to remove agriculture from the Front.”

But conservationists had a variety of views on ranching. Many conservationists believed that ranching was better than subdivision, saying they would rather see “cows than condos.” Other conservationists, newcomers and nonresidents, wanted to see ranching removed from the area. According to one wealthy newcomer, an ideal future for the area would be:

If a fund were raised to acquire all of the private lands along the Front that were up for sale or were acquirable over time. I'd like to see a decent wilderness bill passed...beyond that there should be this gigantic buffer zone where all these lands are managed for wildlife.

A nonresident conservationist described his vision to put a fence around the entire area and reintroduce bison.

[It] would give you everything you ever had there, short of the dinosaurs...I think it's value, even if you had to keep people out of it, not use the Front anymore, because it's so valuable as wildlife habitat that it exceeds recreational value. That'd be great... Just for people to come and look through the fence, it would be more of an economical boom to Choteau and Bynum and Dupuyer than ranching is.

Others saw ranching and conservation as compatible. One newcomer argued that “ranching and wildlife and the wilderness idea can coexist.” A rancher said that “the cattle and the people and the mountains can all live together. The grizzly bears and all that can still all live together.” Different views of ranching did not necessarily fall into neat categories according to long-term resident, newcomer, and nonresident.

Because some ranchers believed that conservationists’ “main goal is control of private property,” discussion of outside attention brought up ideas about private property rights. One rancher says:

I'm a strong supporter of private property rights and it would seem there are takings all the time, whether it's the oil and gas business and how the closure up there has impacted private lands, or whether it's the propagation of grizzly bears that come down here and eat my sheep, or the increasing of the elk herd that come down and tromp your grain.

One farmer/rancher who was a “strong supporter of wilderness” said that he was “all for maintaining private landowner rights and letting them do what they would like to do with their private land.” Another rancher who worked with conservation groups described changes in thinking about property rights:



It comes down to your concept of personal property... We felt, as land owners, that all the rights were ours. We owned the ground. There wasn't anything we couldn't do to it that we ourselves weren't wholly responsible for and nobody else could say anything else about it. And now we know that that's not all true.

While ranchers were divided on their views of wilderness, the Nature Conservancy and conservation easements, they were all concerned about private property right infringement.

Outside attention was also connected to perceptions that decisions affecting residents' lives and livelihood were being made elsewhere. Here is one rancher's response to a question asking how he would describe the area to someone who had never been there.

I would say blue sky, open spaces, clean air, clean water. All of the things that these enviros are suggesting that we aren't protecting. That makes me see red. 'Cause most of them are like yourself, come from a populated area. You have seen what people pollution does. And you suddenly come here and thrust yourself on the natives and say "you're gonna have to do it this way, you're gonna have to do it that way, because we've seen what people pollution does, and we aren't gonna let you do it to this environment."

The feeling of disempowerment that some residents described may have more to do with a perceived or actual loss of control over their lives and less to do with conservation as a concept and practice. After all, there have been homegrown conservation efforts in the area for almost a century. Some residents believe that the conflict is not about conservation efforts, such as protecting grizzly bears, but rather about whether ranchers or the government get to decide the future of the area.

Views on the federal government were frequently brought up in the interviews. A business owner who grew up on a ranch in the area said:

Those things which happen so far away in Washington can really affect people here and when you're so far away from where the decisions that affect your life are being made, it's very easy to feel frustrated, isolated, powerless, disenfranchised, and all of those things.

Even some residents who were incredibly supportive of conservation efforts were frustrated and angry about what they perceived as the imposition of other's values on their lives and place. A rancher who grew up on the Front and has worked with conservation groups described "government intervention."

I'll wake up in a cold sweat just thinking about it. The things that are being thrown in our face that I didn't have to consider 20 years ago because nobody had any idea that we even existed up here. They didn't care. And yet we've been surviving over a hundred years. It was slow-paced, quiet, and simple—it just wasn't complicated... And then, suddenly things changed. Issues that were strictly your own, at your own discretion, your own fate, suddenly became everyone's concerns... I think it was the government intervention that scared the living daylights out of people. It wasn't the Endangered Species Act or the concept behind it. I think people were smart enough to realize that the bear was an indicator and that it was healthy to know that we could keep them alive, if at all possible. It's just that they were afraid that government intervention would become so strong we wouldn't have choice, and it did.

One rancher explained that "a lot of people think the government wants to control, maybe control all of the land." She argued that this attitude was very prevalent. Another rancher pointed out that "all ranchers are independent... I think that's why the rancher resents any interference from the government. I think that's why they resent the Forest Service to an extent." Feelings about the federal government were aired in reference to private lands and to federal lands.

Many people were aware that sense of place, the images and meanings connected with a geographical location, was inseparable from political agendas that would ultimately affect natural resource policy and management. According to a business owner who grew up on a ranch in the area:

I think that they're [ranchers] feeling that it doesn't matter what I feel 'cause the majority of American citizens have a perception of the Front that's different from our perception of Front. They want this place saved, either for the principle of having it there or so they can come and recreate in it. But what about us who are trying to live here?

Because the Rocky Mountain Front is a symbol of outside attention, ideas about the area are inextricably connected to discourses about outsiders and newcomers, about conservation and ranching, and about private property and the federal government. Place meanings cannot be understood separate from these seemingly tangential and highly politicized discourses. Because senses of place on the Rocky Mountain Front are intimately connected with people's concerns about changes in the landscape and policy formed at the local and national level, place meaning is very much political.

## Conclusion

Research results from the study of place on the Rocky Mountain Front point to the importance of paying attention to both common ground and political differences. Williams and Stewart (1998) have challenged us to understand the politics of place and how place is politically contested. By doing so, we can better understand the politics of forest management, and understand different groups of people. Forest Service Sense of Place Protocols argue that "a better understanding of how people interact with the land and how they regard their sense of place can help predict potential conflicts and risks, and help identify trade-offs and points of negotiation" (Manning 1997, p. 8). Unmasking and revealing differences often glossed over in policy and management debates may lead to a richer, potentially more productive dialogue (Vandergeest and DuPuis 1996). Building consensus around forest policy and management does not mean ignoring difference and politics, but rather understanding them where they exist.

However, as stated earlier, understanding place as *both* shared and contested meanings complicates the application of place research in forest policy and management. When different groups of people are vying to define a particular landscape, managers and policymakers cannot build on one common sense of place. If decision-makers assume that a particular image of place is shared and codify that image into policy, continuing conflict may undermine the implementation or effectiveness of that policy.

Despite this limitation, the differences illuminated by place research can inform forest policy and management. Managers, policymakers, and stakeholders, such as community members who live in forest areas, can use these understandings to more effectively engage in the decision-making process. Below we examine the lessons that follow from this particular study, organized according to the three results presented in this paper. We conclude with an exploration of how this research can inform particular decision-making processes.

In the first section, we describe the different ways people conceptualize the Rocky Mountain Front in Montana. As numerous studies have concluded, understanding people's sense of place can provide insight into potential common ground—shared meanings that can unite people and provide a basis for consensus on forest policy and management. In this study, people shared a profound love for and strong attachment to the mountains. Decision-makers can draw on this attachment in their efforts to facilitate productive public dialogue about future management actions for this area.

The research also revealed some strikingly different images of the Rocky Mountain Front. While long-term residents described the place as an inhabited, working, agricultural landscape, newcomers and nonresidents focused on wildness and wildlife (keep in mind that all nonresidents were conservationists or agency staff). These senses of place convey different values and interests, illuminating people's goals and desires for the area. Conflicting senses of place can be a window into what kinds of policies people might or might not support. They reveal the lines along which conflict might arise, and which values should be considered in a decision-making process. In the case of the Rocky Mountain Front, proposals that nurture wildness at the expense of ranching or vice versa may be met with significant resistance. Policies and practices that nurture *both* agriculture and the wild qualities of the area might garner more widespread support.

In the second results section, the contested nature of the place-name Rocky Mountain Front reveals the importance of language and the presence of specific concerns and interests among resident communities. Language matters, and decision-makers need to be aware of conflict over particular terms and place-names. Avoiding highly politicized terms may facilitate discussion of the merits of a particular proposal. In particular, embracing local place-names and terminology validates local knowledge and invites community members to participate in a public dialogue about forest management.

In this case, for some people, the name Rocky Mountain Front was associated with nonresident conservationists, and their values and goals for the area. Anxiety about the growing popularity of this name reflects concerns about the increasing influence of nonresident conservationists over policy and management. In other words, many residents recognize that people who have the power to name and define the area also have the ability to influence decision-making. These residents are concerned about what they see as a loss of control over their lives, livelihoods, and the landscape they live in. Thus, resisting the place-name is a way to ask for and work

toward more local influence over policy and management. Questions about who decides the future of the area, who has a stake in that future, and at what level—local, regional, or national—decision-making should be located should be part of the public dialogue about future policy and management decisions.

However, while many residents were clearly arguing for more local influence over decision-making, other residents used the ascendancy of the “Rocky Mountain Front” to accomplish specific policy goals at the national level. In this study, place meanings did not fall neatly along the lines of long-term residents, newcomers, and nonresidents. Rather, resident communities themselves are diverse. The heterogeneity of resident communities complicates debates over local and national control. Decision-makers need to understand that, despite images of rural communities as homogeneous and static, in reality these communities are complex and dynamic (Belsky 1999, Agarwal and Gibson 1999). Policies cannot be advocated on the basis of a traditional, monolithic “local.” Public dialogue over forest management must therefore take place amongst different groups within local communities *and* between locals and nonlocals.

In the final results section, we show how the landscape itself is symbolic, and how discussion of place meanings triggered discourses about newcomers, private property and ranching, and the federal government. Because certain words and phrases are politically charged and act as a sort of shorthand for particular political positions and agendas, even seemingly neutral descriptions of specific places can quickly polarize a group of people. Understanding how ideas about property, conservation, and government control are linked to senses of place can make people aware of why certain proposals trigger public discussion of political positions and interests that may seem tangential to the proposal at hand. This knowledge can assist participants in addressing these conflicts.

In the case of the Rocky Mountain Front, people's descriptions of how decisions made in Washington DC make them feel powerless and frustrated echoed concerns described above about the scale at which decisions are made and how much local interests are taken into account. Nonresident views about ranching, and whether or not it should continue in the area, also have important policy implications. Nonresident descriptions of the Rocky Mountain Front and ideas about the future role of ranching provide examples of how particular images can be connected to ideas about what is and is not legitimate use. Not surprisingly, opposition to ranching raises concerns amongst resident communities about who controls private property and the continuance of traditional livelihoods. Again, place meanings can alert decision-makers and stakeholders to areas of dissatisfaction, potential conflicts, and policies that might meet the needs of multiple interests.

At the beginning of this article, we mentioned the current focus on collaborative planning and decision-making processes that seek to incorporate the views and interests of multiple stakeholders. Research on the politics

of place can provide a nuanced, in-depth understanding of the positions of different stakeholders prior to a decision-making process. This understanding can increase the effectiveness of communication because managers, policymakers, and stakeholders have a better sense of what other groups mean when they describe their interests in a particular place. If people feel that their positions are understood and heard, they are more likely to participate in a public involvement process.

Furthermore, information about differences and the nature of a particular conflict can help planners decide what kind of decision-making process would be most effective, since different kinds of conflicts require different kinds of public participation (Committee of Scientists 1999). The presence of contested meanings points to the need for a process in which stakeholders have meaningful opportunities for dialogue and real involvement in decision-making. A decision-making process, such as collaboration, that provides stakeholders with active and empowered roles may be effective in such a context. In turn, this sort of decision-making process depends on an understanding of the politics of meaning. Collaborative processes, in particular, require participants to understand different viewpoints because the dialogue process fundamental to collaboration depends on understanding different people and their priorities for a particular area. Knowledge of common ground can also inform collaborative processes.

However, while additional knowledge may sometimes help resolve difficult natural resource issues, better understandings will not necessarily lead to consensus, or even dialogue. Understanding the politics of forest management means recognizing how competing ideas about particular places are rooted in different positions and interests, and how groups of people are differently situated within a larger social and economic structure. Because of these differences, certain natural resource conflicts will remain contentious, even inextricable, despite increasingly sophisticated knowledge of different viewpoints and concerns. Simply put, there may be irresolvable differences. Research on the politics of place can inform forest policy and management by alerting people to different viewpoints and interests, but it cannot eliminate forest politics.

In conclusion, the presence of multiple landscape meanings should alert researchers to the possibility that a particular locality may be contested terrain. If the study of place is to be a holistic, integrated social assessment, then it cannot ignore difference and conflict in an effort to find common ground. In many cases, place meanings and images are highly politicized, actively contested components of cultural battles that are waged, in part, on a symbolic level. Understanding that place meanings may be part of larger political struggles explains why particular images and ideas are often inseparable from the interests of particular groups of people. Conceptualizing place as the intersection of shared *and* contested meanings enables us to see how the images and values people hold for particular locations are connected to natural resource conflict and, where possible, conflict resolution.

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