Hidden Sanctuaries: A Place-Based Study on Special Places

An Honors Thesis

by

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Abstract

Special places are places that people feel strongly. These places hold significance for them based on experiences that they had there that changed their lives. These places can have restorative and therapeutic qualities. That makes these places valuable to counselors and teachers because they need to reach people in a more effective way. I analyzed place-based qualitative data from thirty-four participants about special places. I also did a literature review on special places to get a good background on the subject and to be able to compare my findings to. I created a list of based on empirical trends of special places in order to offer recommendations to create similar experiences.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Melinda Merrick for advising me through this project. Her help and guidance during this long and difficult task was priceless. I could have never done it without her pushing me. I also would not have had a topic if it had not been for her suggestion.
Introduction:

Special Places

Special places are places about which people feel strongly. These places hold significance for them based on the experiences that they have had there. These experiences can be emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, etc. (Schroeder 2002). The importance of special places is demonstrated by the potential for people to have life changing experiences in these places. It is my goal to create a list of criteria based on empirical trends of special places in order to offer recommendations to create similar experiences. This is important for teachers, counselors, etc. because they need to reach people in a more effective way. By using a special place as a venue for educational pursuits, the people they are trying to reach will be more at ease, more ready to deal with issues, and less distracted. This will make it easier for these people to receive any environmental information from the teacher or counselor and to integrate it more effectively.

Many researchers have conducted studies to explain why nature is important and the impact it can have on a person. Brown (2005) analyzed the self-narratives of environmentalists and compared how their experiences with nature affect their lives. He uses this information to explain how having a relationship with nature is important. From his sample, there is a trend for those who do not establish a relationship with nature within the first four-ten years of life to develop hostility towards it. They become very demanding of nature and take a destructive stance toward the resources nature offers. Another trend Brown (2005) found is that the younger the person is when they encounter
nature, the more likely they are to develop a concern and love for it. His research shows that nature gives back to humans in four positive long lasting ways. It lessons anxiety and fosters tranquility, stability, and continuity. It increases the sense of self and identity. It deepens the sense of reality and appreciation of the world. Another interesting finding from this study is that active relationships with the nonhuman world improve the human relationships people have.

Korpela’s qualitative study (2001) suggests areas that provide restorative qualities such as positive mood change, renewal of attention span, and inward reflection are places that are more likely to be special places. Schroeder (2002) had people answer a qualitative survey about places that mean a lot to them. He finds that special places are formed when a person places a highly aesthetic value on an area or has an emotional experience there. His study also notes that special places are sanctuaries for people after threatening or emotionally jarring events. They allow the person to relax, calm down, clear their minds, and face the matter in a safe place. Schroeder finds that special places evoke feelings of emotional well-being, relaxation, serenity, comfortableness, happiness, enjoyment, excitement, awe of beauty, social ties, family history, remoteness, and gratitude.

Glassman (1995) also recognizes the healing power that special places have through her study of women who use the wilderness for psychological healing. She finds that nature is calming and acts as a natural stress management because the Earth is non-judgmental and accepting of all thoughts and emotions. The themes that emerge in her work are childhood memories with nature establishing a life long love and use of it.
Adolescent years and the search for identity are traumatic and hard to cope with, but those with a connection to nature go to it in this time of turmoil for help.

Examples of Special Places

Pyle's (2002) work with children shows that most special places are natural places away from people. Some examples are creeks, canals, ravines, ponds, big trees, clumps of brush, parks especially undeveloped ones, old fields, pastures, and meadows. The participants who encounter these areas have a deep love for them, and sometimes are so touched that they follow a career involving them.

Sobel (1999) questioned a group of people about their past memories of areas that are special to them. He notes that special places can be found anywhere and that in children they are almost universal. Special places allow children to create and manipulate their own little world, but within boundaries. Rural children have it the easiest when it comes to finding special places because there are so many more resources, and it is a safer, freer area so that they can explore without fear. Urban children find special places in interstitial spaces, which are areas that do not really have a given function. Examples of these places are city parks, culverts, alleys, basements, and abandoned warehouses. Suburban area children have few options for special places because there are no interstitial spaces due to development planning, and they lack the wild freedom that rural children have. Special places are usually typical during adolescence and then slowly discarded because that is a time of change and tumult. Sobel (1999) concludes that special places give children a way to cope with all of their issues because of their restorative properties.
Factors that affect Environmental Attitudes

Ewert (2004) discusses factors that affect how a person feels about the environment including gender, age, political ideology, ethnic variation, participation in outdoor recreation activities, parental/peer pressure, and formation of place attachments. These factors lead to two environmental worldviews. One assumes that there is no cap on human growth and that the environmental problems can be solved by technology. The other protects the environment, saves resources, and values nature. There are three main types of recreational activities that affect the type of ecological worldview participants experience. Appreciative recreation like bird watching has little or no impact on the environment. Mechanized recreation involves powerboats and ATVs. Consumptive recreation takes something out of the environment like mushroom hunting. Ewert came to the conclusion that appreciative recreation leads to a conservationist worldview while mechanized and consumptive lead to a destructive worldview. People who are more in tune with nature develop special connections to places with more ease because they see the value in it (Schroeder, 2007). Ewert (2004) also found that family and peers play a major role a person’s environmental belief system. Ewert suggests that education on the environment should start early because after a certain point a person begins to build a bias of their own whether for good or bad.
Methods:

I used research that was previously collected on the subject (Merrick, 2008). I am analyzing one item on place from the larger transcripts. Thirty-four subjects volunteered to be interviewed about the environmental epiphanies that they had experienced. They were then asked a series of open-ended questions on the subject. For example, they were asked to describe the epiphany, the place in detail, and discuss the significance of the place. With this type of data collection there was the risk that the stories could lose part of their validity and some important aspects because the human imagination chooses what gets included and excluded from the story (Vickers, 2003). I reviewed the narratives to become familiar with the background of each. I analyzed the responses regarding the description of the place in detail. I used a form of qualitative coding called content analysis to arrive at different themes that would contribute to the meaning of place (Gustafson, 2001).

I first analyzed the question about the description of place and documented emerging themes. From that list, I developed broad categories such as geographical location, setting, natural features, ecological biomes, and perceptions. I then made subcategories that were more narrowed and specific. In some instances a third level was added to differentiate the category even more. My categories are described in detail below (see Appendix A for full list of coding categories).

For geographical location I separated the United States into regions. The Western United States was the region from North Dakota south to Texas and then everything to
the west of that. The Midwestern United States region was Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio. The Southern United States region was Arkansas, Kentucky, West Virginia and then all of the states south of there. The Eastern United States region was Pennsylvania, Maryland, and then everything northeast of there. There was then a category for any epiphanies that happened in Europe. The other category incorporated areas where there was only one account. This included Madagascar, Costa Rica, and Canada.

The setting was the area where the epiphany occurred. One category was indoors. Outdoors familiar described places that the participant was familiar with before the epiphany. Outdoors recreational represented places that were national parks or areas where the person was participating in a recreational activity like hiking. Outdoors unfamiliar were areas that the participant had never been to before the epiphany. Outdoors other represented a changing setting. There was only one participant that fell under this category and it was a man who went on a road trip across country and therefore fell into more than one category.

The ecological biome category was separated based on the regions the participants listed as where their epiphany took place. A biome represented the temperature, precipitation, geography, and overall climate of the area. This was separate from geological location because different locations can be in the same biome. There was the temperate deciduous forest, temperate grassland, taiga/tundra, Mediterranean/chaparral, and tropical rain forest biomes. Looking at a map that was labeled with political markings as well as biome regions identified these.
Natural features were any thing that might be found outdoors. In order to be included in this coding category the participants had to mention the feature and it had to be a main piece of the description. There was one category labeled no natural features and this represented the narratives that focused on human made objects. The other areas were water, trees, rocks/land formations, grasslands, plants other than grasses or trees, wild animals, domestic animals, wind, sunlight, and precipitation.

Perceptions were broken down into two different areas. The first was colors perceived. In order to be included in this category, the participant had to come out and describe something as a color. The areas were green, brown, blue, and no color preference. The other perception category was feelings perceived. These were feelings that the participants stated they had before or during their epiphany. At the end of all of the epiphanies for the most part there was a positive feeling. One category was awed; this was either from the beauty or some other features of nature. Scared describes participants who had a life or death situation that lead to their epiphany. Sad and depressed were a category as well. If the person did not mention any explicit feelings that they were having they were put into the no feelings category.

After creating all of these categories, I again analyzed each of the responses and coded them using my unit of analysis, which was the whole response to the description of the epiphany place. I recorded every category that the response fell into. I then went through and counted the number of people who had mentioned each category to see what trends in frequency there were. I put these items in order of most frequent to least frequent in charts for each category.
Results:

I. Geographical Location as Described by Participants

Table 1. Frequency of occurrences of geographical locations in regard to environmental epiphanies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographical Location</th>
<th>Frequency (# of Participants)</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>US-Western</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>35.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US-Mid West</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US-Southern</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US-Eastern</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>34</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The western and Midwest United States had the highest number of participants that experienced environmental epiphanies. The eastern United States had the least amount of occurrences.

II. Setting as Described by Participants

Table 2. Frequency of occurrences of setting in regard to environmental epiphanies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Frequency (# of Participants)</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outdoors Recreational</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoors Unfamiliar</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoors Familiar</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indoors</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoors other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>34</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Areas that are outdoors recreational and outdoors unfamiliar had the most participants that experienced environmental epiphanies. Outdoors other was the least frequently occurring.
III. Ecological Biomes as Described by Participants

Table 3. Frequency of occurrence of ecological biomes in regard to environmental epiphanies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ecological Biomes</th>
<th>Frequency (# of Participants)</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temperate Deciduous Forest</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>55.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperate Grassland</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiga/Tundra</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediterranean/Chaparral</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tropical Rain Forest</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants most often frequented temperate deciduous forests. Tropical rain forests were the least frequented by participants.

IV. Natural Features as Described by Participants

Table 4. Frequency of occurrence of natural features in regard to environmental epiphanies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Natural Features</th>
<th>Frequency (# of Participants)</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Water/Rivers/Ocean</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest/Trees</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rocks/Mountains/Land Formations</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wild Animals</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plants Other than grasses and trees</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grasslands/Prairies</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Natural Features</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wind</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunlight</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precipitation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Animals</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Water and forest had the highest frequency of participants that encountered them. Rocks and wild animals closely followed. Precipitation and domestic animals had the lowest frequency.
V. Perceptions as Described by Participants

Table 5. Frequency of occurrence of color perceptions in regard to environmental epiphanies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colors Perceived</th>
<th>Frequency (# of Participants)</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Color</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preference Stated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most participants stated no color preference. Green, brown, and blue were all equally stated, but it was not significant.

Table 6. Frequency of occurrence of feeling perceptions in regard to environmental epiphanies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feelings Perceived</th>
<th>Frequency (# of Participants)</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Feelings Mentioned</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>41.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awed</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scared</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadness or Depression</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most common feeling occurrence was no feeling at all. The feeling of awe was the second most common. The feeling of sadness or depression was the least frequent occurrence.
Discussion:

Analysis of the Results

The majority of participants had their experiences in the Western and Midwestern United States. The reason why the number of Midwestern experiences may have been so high is because this is the region that most interviews were conducted. The large number of recreational parks and the vast areas of wilderness could explain the high number of Western United States occurrences. This coincides with the results for the setting. Outdoors recreational has the highest frequency, along with outdoors unfamiliar. Outdoors settings of all types were very high. Korpela’s (2001) results also pointed to natural settings being highest in proportion for special places.

Temperate deciduous forest is mentioned most often for biomes. This could be in part because most of participants were from areas with this biome. The second highest was temperate grassland. The majority of the United States is temperate grassland and temperate deciduous forest. This correlates with the geographical location since the majority of occurrences happened in the United States. Tropical rain forest is the lowest occurring because they are found in a limited number of areas.

Water is the natural feature that is mentioned by participants the most. For example, one participant says, “I really enjoyed going down to the ocean and spending time on the beach. I always felt peaceful there.” Forests, rocks, and wild animals closely follow water features. One participant said the following when talking about his experience, “Most of my free time was spent running in the woods, camping out in the many acres of woods that surrounded our house...it reminded me of how important nature was to me as an experience.” Another participant said, “I love trees. So, it was
special in that way, definitely. That’s why I went. I have to be around trees.”

Schroeder’s (2002) findings also show that water, topographic, wildlife, and vegetative features are common in special places. These are all very common elements in outdoor areas, which could explain why these features are mentioned so frequently.

Color perception seems not to be very important at least within this data set. The majority of people do not mention any color preference. The colors that are stated—green, brown, blue—represent natural colors. Green is reminiscent of vegetation, brown of earth, and blue of water. Feeling perceptions are not mentioned very much either within the place description itself. However, in the larger study (Merrick, 2008) positive emotions were frequently mentioned in epiphany descriptions. The feeling that is felt the most is awe. This usually involves an overwhelming feeling of beauty or power that the wilderness presents. This is an example of a participant in awe over a grove of pine trees, “It just felt like a cathedral. It smelled wonderfully green and fresh and with lighting just coming in through the trees, it was incredible.” Another participant when asked about what she remembered said, “Just the beauty of the whole thing.”

Fear is also a significant perception. This creates life-changing events that are based on a fear of dying. The relief of escaping death leaves the participant with an optimistic outlook on life and a reverence for the power or nature (Schroeder, 2007). One woman mentioned about her experience, “It was really fun to feel overpowered by the ocean...I started to feel weak...I realized if I didn’t go in and like try really hard, I was going to die out there...so it was a very scary and very awakening.”
Recommendations to Create Special Places

From the data, I believe the following would be a good list to start with when trying to create a special place. A temperate deciduous forest or a temperate grassland biome would be best and easily accessible for most living in the United States. There should be an area outside preferably in a recreation area such as a national or state park. The area should have water, forest, rock formations, and wildlife in some combination.

For teachers, outdoor activities in areas such as this can help students connect to the environment and the organisms in it (Pyle, 2002). An example would be “Kids in Creeks” or “Project River Watch” which provide hands on field experience with water testing and collecting organisms from local bodies of water. Field trips to parks, rivers, forests, or even possibly zoos would be beneficial in creating a connection with nature. Schools could start an adventure club that would involve going on camping trips, spelunking, rock climbing, etc. Building schools or counseling facilities in a more natural environment or with close access to one would be beneficial. Counselors could start holding sessions outside with patients. They could also tell their patients to do things outdoors or take a vacation and go hiking to try to calm them down.

Not all people will have access to natural areas. For people who cannot find truly natural spaces and special places there is an alternative. They can use biophilic architecture. This involves making rooms and buildings feel more like natural areas. In order to do this, rooms need to have complexity, mystery, open spaces, water, and vegetative elements. This can be done through having plants and fountains in rooms. There should be ordered complexity like tiling, ornament mosaics, stained glass, and oriental carpets (Yannick, 2007).
Conclusion:

Being able to create special places for people is important because it can help them cope with difficulties encountered in life. This may be particularly important for counselors and teachers because they deal with people who are often emotionally unstable and upset. The restorative properties of a special place could be quite rejuvenating and helpful for patients. One participant who was struggling with issues in her life and depression said this when talking about a river, “…it was like the water would just take it all away. It would take away everything about my parents fighting or whatever…I was going down there all the time…like I was really indebted to the river because it was saving me.” Another who was moving described how the ocean helped her, “I’d gone to say goodbye to the places that I loved…I went to say goodbye to the ocean…The waves were very calm…It’s almost as if I felt this connection where the ocean kind of told me, see, we told you it would be okay…you’ll be back.” Everybody deserves to have a place that makes them feel safe and whole again. The criteria and suggestions provided above can serve as a basis for future studies of the significance of special places.
Resources:


Appendix A-Coding Categories

**Geographical Location**
- US
  - Southern (GUS)
  - Mid West (GUM)
  - Eastern (GUE)
  - Western (GUW)
- European (GEU)
- Other (GO)

**Ecological Biomes**
- Temperate Deciduous Forest (ETD)
- Temperate grassland/Prairie (ETG)
- Mediterranean/Chaparral (EM)
- Taiga/tundra (ET)
- Tropical Rain Forest (ETR)

**Setting**
- Indoors (SI)
- Outdoors
  - Familiar (SOF)
  - Not familiar (SON)
  - Recreational (SOR)
  - Other (SOO)

**Natural Features**
- Water/Rivers/Ocean (NFL)
- Forest/Trees (NFF)
- Rocks/Mountains/Land Formations (NFR)
- Grasslands/Prairies (NFG)
- Plants other than grass and trees (NFPO)
- Animals
  - Wild (NFAW)
  - Domestic (NFAD)
- Wind (NFW)
- Sunlight (NFS)
- Precipitation (NFP)

**Perceptions**
- Colors
  - Blue (PCB)
  - Green (PCG)
  - Brown (PCBR)
  - Other/None (PCO)
- Feelings
  - Sadness (PFT)
  - Scared (PFS)
  - Awed (PFA)
  - Other (PFO)