

Why Connect to These?

There is a necessary connection between direct life-place experience and true belonging. It is not a “virtual reality” proposition. If we are not directly tied to the land through our vocation, then we must attach to it by avocation. To really belong is to immerse oneself within; there are no substitutes for “being there.”

Robert L. Thayer (Life Place: Bioregional Thought and Practice)

Despite being a landscape planner and an environmental academic, Thayer credits outdoor recreation for his link to the place he calls home. He says that a community’s sense of belonging, and level of attachment to and concern for the welfare of a natural region is directly proportionate to the ability to access the representative spaces and natural character of that region.

Research has shown that illegal trespass and damage to property is inversely related (not proportionately) to opportunity to legally access nature. Accessible open space is essential to those who live in dense suburban and urban areas, and open nature that represents various ecosystems is essential for a public to embrace management and restoration of ecosystems.

Connection

Recreation plays an important part in connecting people to a life place, but why is that connection important? Most will immediately agree that we care for the places we feel connected to. Elsewhere in Hidden Corner have we spoken of the psychological and educational importance of time spent outdoors, but in this context the time spent recreating not only refreshes the spirit, it engenders care for the place that refreshes the spirit.

Quests into the outdoors help many develop a sense of meaning and purpose, and after awhile, perhaps like an otter playing in its favorite creek, the fun begins to take on a larger than life role.

Recreation

Ninety percent of Americans no longer make their living from the land. We cannot become so disengaged from the land that our only connection to it is through the grocery store when we buy our food. For many the primary means of engaging with the landscape is recreation. Studies have shown that well-managed public access to open space for ethical recreation increases a sense of belonging and care for a region.

Place of Life

Bioregions are typically identified by dominant vegetation types, but they also correspond to watersheds which are determined by topography. The flowers and plants that grow there provide habitat for the animals, and a backdrop to our homes, cities and farms. Bioregions are therefore defined in terms of distinct communities of life, both human and nonhuman. Since this has ecological implications, it would seem to make perfect sense that the closer our connections to the land we call home, the better our condition will be.

Weather, water and earth mixed with a variety of cultural influences fashion the place we call home. As a place of life, whether planning to settle here or not, whether invested in the region or not, humans benefit from being connected to the local landscape.

Wendell Berry writes that a healthy community is a form of life that includes all the local things that are connected by the larger, ultimately mysterious form of Creation. "In speaking of community then, we are speaking of a complex connection not only among human beings or between human beings and their homeland but also between the human economy and nature," says Berry.

Fundamentally, no matter our worldview, we all share the desire to be healthy in a healthy world. As Berry says, within us all is the human wish to die in a world in which we have been glad to live. If no connection exists, this cannot happen.