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Environmental Decision-Making and Sense of Place: Exploring the Effects of Bears Ears' Shifting Status on Stakeholders' Personal Relationships to the Land

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I approached this research from the interdisciplinary, academic lens of political ecology, a field of study that combines foci from both anthropology and environmental policy. Wielding a research legacy, grappling with issues of contested resources, land tenure, and indigenous rights, the field of political ecology explores the interconnectedness of our environment and the social, political, and economic spheres of society. To inform my political/ecocological approach, I drew from existing literature of the field; all of which was particularly influential in that it highlighted a similar struggle to that over Bears Ears, but between the Mi'gmaq Indian Tribe and the Kelly Rock corporation. His discussion surrounds Kelly Rock's inability to grasp the cultural significance—the immense spirituality—that the Mi'gmaq held to the mountain: what was a central motive for the Mi'gmaq's resistance, was an illegible nonetheless valid—reason for conservation.

This research was largely driven by the academic discussion of sense of place, which environmentalist Wallace Stegner defined as “the kind of knowing that involves the senses, the memory, the history of a family or a tribe; the knowledge of a place that transcends single generations and looks to the future” (Fleming 2011). Sense of place—as is in the title of my research project—is a essential language to the discussion of human connection to the land.

Another piece that influenced this research was Terry Tempest Williams’, The Open Space of Democracy (2004), in which she explores the interaction of spirituality, personal connection, social change, and politics in the context of democracy. She notes that, as humans, we are members of a local, national, and global community; thus, we must be actively engaged in all of these realms. She advocates for a passion-based conservation movement: Tempest Williams argues that true change comes from a local level—from those who are imprisoned by causes and driven to act on those passions—thus, we are not hopeless at the hands of our federal government. Social change, according to her perspective, begins from the grassroots level, if our community members bring themselves to be engaged in the democratic process.

I spent ten weeks conducting research on how sense of place is affected by environmental decision-making, closely examining Bears Ears National Monument—in southeastern Utah—as a case study. I was able to spend much of June and July in the field, travelling throughout southeastern Utah and southwestern Colorado. In those ten weeks, I was inspired by the methodological framework of Community Based Participatory Research. Though I did not have time to engage in a full-fledged CBPR project, I incorporated many aspects of that methodological approach (Hacker 2013).

Prior to entering the field, I undertook extensive archival research (of which I will elaborate upon, in the pre-existing literature panel of this paper), which framed the way in which I later analyzed my data. Looking specifically at sense of place, the most vital data I gathered was the narratives of those most closely affected by the shifts in environmental decision-making: my research was largely based in the lived experience of people: my research was conducted through structured interviews with individuals, and informal conversations with stakeholders of varying backgrounds. While pre-existing literature was key to informing this research, I found that stakeholders, whether they are particularly vital in that it gives voice to stakeholders who may often be excluded from the environmental decision-making process.