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*Research Brief*

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John Muir's Wilderness  
Writings**

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*Research Brief:*

## **The Significance of Place in John Muir's Wilderness Writings**

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### **Abstract**

John Muir was a prominent figure in the North American conservation movement who advocated for the preservation of wilderness throughout his life. Muir's writings depict a wealth of assigned values to some of North America's most wild places. The topic of "place" is one area of contemporary research that can be applied to Muir's writings on wilderness to examine how his ideas might hold currency in modern times. It is from a conceptual framework of place that this study responds to the following research questions through a qualitative approach utilizing text analysis: What are the connections and disconnections between Muir's writings on wilderness and contemporary place attachment literature? How might contemporary place attachment literature benefit from John Muir's writings? Results of this study highlight the historical and contemporary importance within Muir's writings on preserving and exploring wilderness areas to encourage place attachment. Implications are discussed.

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**Keywords:** place attachment, wilderness, John Muir, text analysis

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### Introduction

Person-place relationships continue to receive attention within many disciplines including, but not limited to, the fields of recreation, natural resource management, geography, and architecture (e.g., Davenport & Anderson, 2005; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2006; Kyle, Grafe, & Manning, 2004). From a cursory viewpoint there have been few inroads within these research disciplines to investigate the historical relevance and significance of person-place conceptualizations. This study, in part, seeks to critically examine the relevance of one current model of place attachment (Scannell & Gifford, 2010) in relation to the historical context of John Muir and the writings surrounding his travels and explorations as they pertain to wilderness place-based research.

John Muir (1838-1914) was a Scottish-born American naturalist, author, and a prominent figure in the North American conservation movement who advocated for the preservation of wilderness. He spent much of his life exploring natural areas across the United States; in particular, he spent significant time in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California and on the Alaskan coast. Muir's writings depict his wealth of experience in some of North America's most wild places, illustrating an in-depth understanding of natural environments and their assigned values. Muir published six volumes of wilderness writings, with many essays and narratives published posthumously, covering his wanderings across North American wilderness. One of Muir's most noted accomplishments was co-founding the Sierra Club in 1892, which has worked to help save wild places such as Sequoia National Park in California. Fast-forward one hundred years after Muir's explorations and writings, and it is possible to find a plethora of research studies that continue to investigate the connections between people and natural areas. Furthermore, Muir's contributions go beyond the literary, as much of his life's work can be found to influence various topics such as wilderness, class and ethnici-

ty, and environmentalism (e.g., Callicott & Nelson, 1998; DeLuca & Demo, 2001).

### Human Experience with Place

This paper offers a brief overview of the broad discourse within place-based research and conceptual writing, highlighting ideas that illustrate the discussion of the human experience with wilderness places. The concept of place has evolved into an ongoing discussion about how people develop and experience a sense of attachment or connection to a particular location (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). The study of place is best applied to "...those fragments of the human environment where meaning, activities and a specific landscape are all implicated and enfolded by each other" (Relph, 1976, p. 37). Physical places, such as wilderness environments, can have varied influences and effects on the human experience (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977). For the purposes of this study, person-place experiences can be categorized into two distinct areas: sense of place and place attachment.

Conceptually, "sense of place" is one area of contemporary research that can be easily applied to Muir's writings on wilderness. An illustrative definition for sense of place is "... an experientially based intimacy with the natural processes, community, and history of one's place" (Sanger, 1997, p. 2). In connection with the concept of sense of place, place attachment further characterizes the bonding between individuals' places of importance (Low & Altman, 1992). Two concepts that help to operationalize place attachment found commonly within the research literature are: (1) place identity (i.e., emotional attachment) and, (2) place dependence (i.e., functional attachment) (Vaske & Korbin, 2001). It is noteworthy that recent research continues to suggest that increased place identity may lead to pro-environmental intentions to the natural environment as a whole (Halpenny, 2010). Furthermore, place attachment has developed through mainly quantitative and empirical research within both the urban (home/ community) (Galster, 2001; Lewicka, 2008)

and wilderness (outdoor) (Smaldone, 2006; Williams, Patterson, Roggenbuck & Watson, 1992) perspectives. This process largely began with Low and Altman's (1992) seminal work and has progressed towards more detailed models and frameworks that help characterize the phenomenon of place attachment.

At the time of writing, the progress of place attachment is well represented within Scannell and Gifford's (2010) tripartite-framework of place attachment. Their framework emphasizes three main points of place attachment: people; place; and process. This framework is synthesized from the various definitions and dimensions of place attachment found within the literature. Due to the framework's composition, it is intended as a functional tool in which to test and compare various approaches to place attachment. Scannell and Gifford describe place attachment as a branched framework that is composed of three main dimensions, each having subdomains: (1) Person [(a) cultural/ group & (b) individual]; (2) Place [(a) social and (b) physical]; and (3) Process [(a) affect; (b) cognition; and (c) behavior]. It is from this conceptual framework that this study will respond to the following research questions: (1) What are the connections and disconnections between Muir's writings on wilderness and the dimensions of contemporary place attachment literature? (2) How might contemporary place attachment literature benefit from Muir's writings?

### Methods

The rationale for selecting Muir's writings as historical texts for this study is based on his influential role within the preservationist movement, the depth and detail of his writing, and his unique approach toward experiencing wilderness areas through intellect, emotions, and experience. The following texts are included within the analysis: *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Muir, 1917), *Stickeen* (Muir, 1909), and *Travels in Alaska* (Muir, 1915). These compilations are some of Muir's most well-known accounts of his wilderness explorations. Data

analysis and coding were organized within the ATLAS.ti qualitative software package.

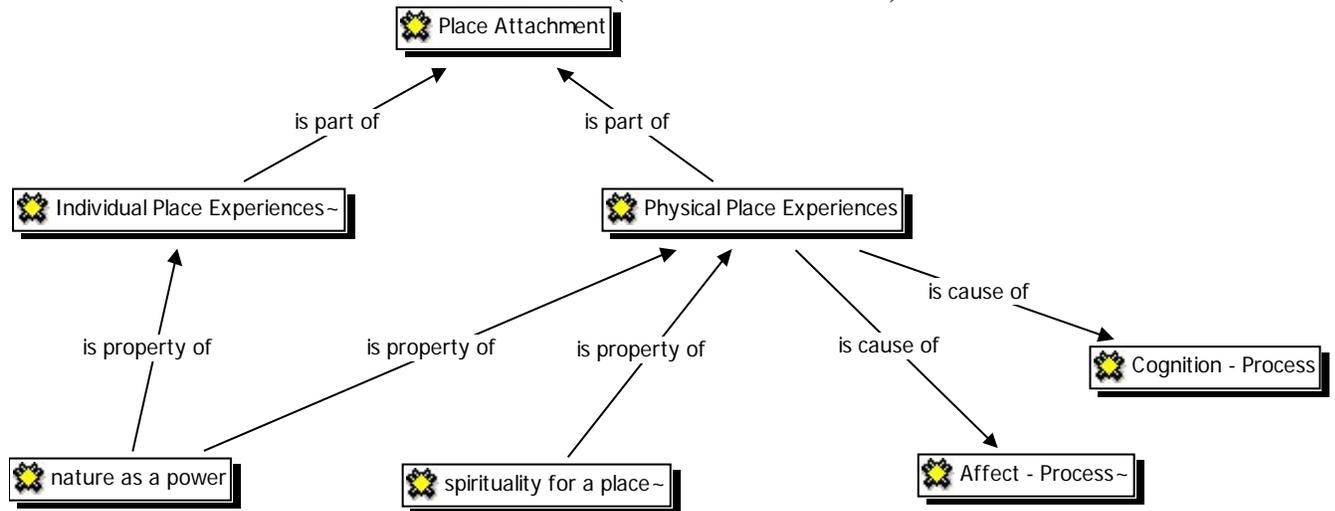
Muir's selected works were coded using Scannell and Gifford's (2010) place attachment framework (person, place, and process) as the main coding matrix. The framework offered seven clear themes that were found within the literature to influence place attachment (themes are listed previously). Scannell and Gifford's place attachment framework was used as a coding matrix because: (a) it offered a refined and generalizable representation of the major domains of place attachment; and (b) would be one method in which to compare how a modern conceptualization of place attachment relates to Muir's historically relevant experiences and writings of nature and wilderness.

Analysis was conducted by one of the researchers who initially coded all three works looking for data that might be interpreted as relevant to place attachment. Once these selections were identified the same researcher interpreted the selections based on the language used within the coding matrix (framework) and applied the specific codes to each selection. Furthermore, any passages that were not captured within the language of the framework were set aside. These remaining passages were open-coded based on their expressed meanings and finally condensed into the two additional codes not found within the initial coding framework. Furthermore, the codes and themes were organized into a thematic network that allowed for synthesis and comparison with the original Scannell and Gifford framework. Finally, both researchers discussed the coding process and thematic network connections to check for consistency and accuracy within the analysis of the data.

### Results

This section presents the results of this study and is organized under the following sections: foundational themes, process themes, and emergent themes. Of Muir's three texts, each corroborated his sentiments and valuation of the natural world with the

**Figure 1. John Muir's Place Attachment Framework (Atlas.ti network view)**



propensity and genre of coded themes across each of the three texts that were analyzed. The names of themes and Muir's words are italicized in the following sections. See Figure 1 for an illustration of Muir's place attachment framework as described in the following paragraph.

#### **Foundational Themes (Individual and Physical Place Experiences)**

The two most prominent coded dimensions of Scannell and Gifford's (2010) place attachment framework were *individual place experiences* (a component of the Person dimension) and *physical place experiences* (a component of the Place dimension). These two themes provide the foundation for all of the other themes and form the two main domains for Muir's attachment to the natural world.

*Individual place experiences* represent Muir's personal lived interactions with the natural world. Drawn from the texts, these experiences include the personalized acts of mountaineering, camping, climbing, hiking, running, and drawing/ sketching. Muir was very active in the outdoors, often spending prolonged periods of time embedded in the natural environment. The following quotation illustrates the personal significance of Muir's individual place experience: "Toward sunset, enjoyed a fine run to

camp, down the long south slopes, across ridges and ravines, gardens and avalanche gaps, through the firs and chaparral, enjoying wild excitement and excess of strength, and so ends a day that will never end" (Muir, 1917, p. 104).

*Physical place experiences* encompass the geographical dimensions, textures, colors, and appearances of natural features within the landscape. Muir spent much of his time immersed within natural landscapes of grandeur (e.g., Yosemite in California and the coasts and glaciers of Alaska) that were primarily "untrammelled" in comparison to their modern adaptations. The complexities of Muir's insights into the physical characteristics of the natural world are highlighted in the following passage:

After we passed between the two mountain rocks that guard the gate of the fiord, the view that was unfolded fixed every eye in wondering admiration. No words can convey anything like an adequate conception of its sublime grandeur -- the noble simplicity and fineness of the sculpture of the walls; their magnificent proportions; their cascades, gardens, and forest adornments; the placid fiord between

them; the great white and blue ice wall,  
and the snow-laden mountains beyond.  
(Muir, 1915, p. 57)

### Process Themes

While individual and physical place experiences seem to provide the foundation for Muir's relationship to natural settings, *cognition* and *affect* (both sub-dimensions of Scannell and Gifford's (2010) Process dimension) further develop the *physical place experiences* domain of Muir's place attachment. It is noteworthy that neither of these themes (*cognition* or *affect*) seems to relate to Muir's *individual place experiences* (see figure 1).

Within *cognition*, Muir develops meaning, increases his knowledge, and refines place-based memories through his understanding of the physical characteristics of the natural world. The following quotation shows how the physical environment led Muir to explore a deeper meaning of existence:

But when we contemplate the whole globe as one great dewdrop, striped and dotted with continents and islands, flying through space with other stars all singing and shining together as one, the whole universe appears as an infinite storm of beauty. (Muir, 1915, p. 8)

Similarly, Muir's *physical place experiences* develop, in part, through *affect*. *Affect* comprises of sentiments and feelings such as awe, joy, and beauty that he developed from his experiences with the physical characteristics of the natural world. This is evidenced in the depth of detail to which Muir ascribes various sentiments to the natural world:

The snow on the high mountains is melting fast, and the streams are singing bank-full, swaying softly through the level meadows and bogs, quivering with sun-spangles, swirling in pot-holes, resting in deep pools, leaping, shouting in wild, exulting energy over rough boulder dams, joyful, beautiful in all their forms. (Muir, 1917, p. 104)

### Emergent Themes

Two themes emerged from the texts that are not contained within Scannell and Gifford's (2010) place attachment framework. The authors coded these themes as the *spirituality for a place*, and *nature as power*. Both themes were included within this analysis because they were found to be significant avenues in which Muir found attachment to his wilderness places. Additionally, these themes were included because of their relationship to Muir's *individual* and *physical place experiences* (see Figure 1 for a visual representation of the linkages).

Muir was undoubtedly a spiritual person; however, his spirituality was not entirely in concordance with the norms of his traditional Christian upbringing. Muir writes of the *spirituality for a place* in terms of encountering God, or his own interpretation of God, and further underscores place-specific spiritual values within the physical elements of the natural world in the following example: "No wonder the hills and groves were God's first temples, and the more they are cut down and hewn into cathedrals and churches, the farther off and dimmer seems the Lord himself" (Muir, 1917, p. 96). Muir's *spirituality for a place* does not seem to fit within the "religious" category of Scannell and Gifford's (2010) framework. According to Scannell and Gifford, the subdomain "religious" is classified as a cultural/group function (part of the Person domain).

The theme, *spirituality for a place*, transcends the cultural/group religious norms and is based within Muir's personal ideas of spirituality. His ideas seem to be crystallized through his interpretation and admiration of the physical and particular characteristics of the natural environments he travelled through. This theme can be contextualized within the historical time period in which Muir lived (post-romanticism) and his admiration of Thoreau's work and Transcendentalism. The framing and placement of this theme, in this study, could certainly be further debated within the place attachment literature, which discusses religion, sacred places, and spirituality

(e.g., Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004). Nonetheless, Muir's spiritual connection strongly characterizes his attachment to places.

*Nature as power* illuminates Muir's feeling that nature exerts a powerful force that is apparent within his *individual place experiences* and his *physical place experiences* as they relate to aspects of Scannell and Gifford's (2010) place attachment framework. Muir describes this powerful force through his sense of it, described simply as "nature." Muir identifies his view of nature as an entity or force to be reckoned with: "How gently the winds blow! Scarce can these tranquil air-currents be called winds. They seem the very breath of Nature, whispering peace to every living thing" (Muir, 1917, p. 24). Through Muir's writing, *nature as power* seems to be one of the principal reasons why he preferred to spend vast amounts of time exploring wilderness settings as a solitary wanderer. Muir further describes the power of nature in the following excerpt,

But nature, it seems, was at the bottom of the affair, and she gains her ends with dogs as well as with men, making us do as she likes, shoving and pulling us along her ways, however rough, all but killing us at times in getting her lessons driven hard home. (Muir, 1909, p. 5)

For Muir, nature's power represents both aesthetically pleasing aspects of place as well as the harshness within certain types of person-place interactions.

### Discussion

Overall, the results of this study highlight some of the main domains of a contemporary place attachment framework found within three selected texts of Muir's writings. Furthermore, these results highlight the profound impact that both the physical place and the experience of being in places imparted upon Muir within a place attachment context. Given Muir's contributions to the early conservation movement in the United States, the influence that wilderness had on Muir's life may further the dis-

ussion as to whether or not wilderness experiences and the subsequent attachment ascribed to those places leads individuals towards preservationist values and actions. For Muir, wilderness was not simply an attraction; he viewed wilderness through his own place-based lens, finding personalized value in the physical characteristics, experiences, and power within many of the places he explored and studied. Future research can further the connections between the works of seminal wilderness writers such as Muir and the ways people express attachment to modern wilderness places (e.g., national parks) as well as the influence those attachments have on pro-environmental intentions toward the natural world as a whole (Halpenny, 2010). Furthermore, deepening the understanding between historical and contemporary person-place relationships may help highlight the value of historical and conventional place themes in modern-day contexts.

All of the themes that emerged in this study shape a framework to which Muir's place attachment can be conceptualized and considered in relation to Scannell and Gifford's (2010) place attachment framework. Muir's place attachment was centered on both the experience of a setting (coded as *individual place experiences*), and the physical characteristics of a setting (coded as *physical place experiences*) and represents a divergence within the layout of Scannell and Gifford's (2010) tripartite place attachment framework. Additionally, the subthemes found within the study (*affect* and *cognition*) were not directly linked to the Process dimension but rather to the foundational themes. Furthermore, Muir's writings bring forward two emergent themes: *spirituality for a place* and *nature as power*. Neither of these themes is well encapsulated within Scannell and Gifford's place attachment framework and show that human experiences with places are, at times, difficult to characterize through a broad framework.

The divergence between Scannell and Gifford's (2010) broad framework and the more specific framework proposed within Muir's writings rein-

forces the notion that not all types of place attachment should be characterized in the same way. Scannell and Gifford's framework accurately identifies many of the empirically significant avenues in which place attachment is documented to occur. However, a broad layout may reduce the richness, individualism, and uniqueness to which a person's place attachment can be characterized and understood. While the place attachment literature is well suited to deconstruct the human experience in place, it appears to be less suited to represent the variability and uniqueness that characterizes an individual's relationship to specific places such as those described by Muir. Therefore, it seems plausible to suggest that qualitative methods that aim to unearth the complexity of an individual's lived experience and which guide the characterization of person-place relationships, should be used in concert with broader place-based frameworks in future research on the topic of place.

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