Place meanings surrounding an urban natural area: A qualitative inquiry

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\textbf{Abstract}

This article describes a qualitative analysis of place-based meanings held by members of a conservation advocacy group, or “Friends of…” group living within watershed boundaries surrounding a public, urban arboretum in South Central Wisconsin. Responses to semi-structured interview questions were analyzed using an iterative analytic method. Indicators of place-based meanings associated with this urban natural area were assessed from interview transcripts. An integrative model of Arboretum Meanings emerged from the analysis highlighting place meanings associated with various attributes of the area. Use of this urban natural area was often associated with a deep appreciation of its biodiversity, as a location for sanctuary or escape, a place for recreation and exercise, and as a meeting place for friends and family.

Results are discussed in terms of how place-based meanings can inform land managers and conservation advocacy group leaders to better understand their stakeholders, maintain the most desirable elements of urban natural areas, and reduce potential conflict resulting from divergent place meanings among user groups.

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1. Introduction

Humans have been encroaching upon fields, forests, and waterways by converting these spaces to farmland, urban housing and commercial developments for centuries. Lands within the city limits that maintain their natural integrity help sustain the ecological health of cities by retaining some or all of their biodiversity (Ryan, 2005). Advocacy organizations in the ecological or environmental arena, such as those supporting urban natural area preservation, typically have mission statements reflecting environmental protection as a core value and educational outreach as a fundamental goal (Heimlich, 2010). Advocacy group leaders and natural resource managers who recognize that ecological resources and related social dynamics exist within a “meaning-filled spatial…context” (Williams, 1995, p. 3) will be better able to use place-based meanings to inform comprehensive management decisions. Aspects of these meanings, as explained below, are the focus of this paper.

Urban natural areas often become special places for community members to visit for recreation, sanctuary, connection to the natural environment, and social gatherings. As these areas are preserved and protected, however, they are also manipulated. With increased human traffic - whether by foot, bike, off-road vehicle, or boat - parks and wildlife areas are altered over time by humans no less than by natural elements such as invasive plant and animal species, seasonal flooding, fire, and other disruptions from changing climatic patterns. Conservation advocacy organizations, such as the many “Friends of…” groups having developed in recent decades, play an important role in “educating the public about important land use issues and focusing public interest in a constructive fashion” (Bartholomew, 1999, p. 359). Land use decisions by resource managers, community leaders, and local residents have become increasingly important for judiciously preserving publicly protected lands (Davenport & Anderson, 2005). The University of Wisconsin (UW) Arboretum (see map, Fig. 1) is located within the city limits of Madison, Wisconsin; a city of over 228,000 people, the state capital, and home to the University of Wisconsin. This arboretum includes a 339 acre lake, Lake Wingra, and is an example of an urban natural area that has, at times, sparked contentious debate over land use proposals and decisions. One of the several conservation advocacy groups in the area, the Friends of Lake Wingra, formed in 1998 intent on “improving the health of Lake Wingra through coordinated watershed management and by engaging the watershed community in stewardship of the lake and its watershed” (Friends of Lake Wingra, 2010). Organizations such as the Friends of Lake Wingra provide instrumental support in the community by, among other things, organizing volunteers, raising funds for ecological projects, and voicing concerns in local politics.
Focusing on this particular urban natural area and this local conservation advocacy group, this article has two main objectives: (1) to present a range of place-based meanings ascribed by watershed residents who are also members of a local conservation advocacy group, and (2) to examine perceptions of and meanings associated with landscape change among this same group. The purpose of these objectives is to inform the leadership of urban natural areas and allied conservation advocacy groups about the views of their stakeholders and members regarding symbolic place meanings to better inform management decisions and outreach programs addressing resource use and change.

2. Conceptual foundation

Relationships between people and their environments are complex. Places overall, be it in the home, the neighborhood, or a public park, represent not only physical settings and activities within those settings but also the meanings and emotions people associate with those settings (Davenport & Anderson, 2005). The sense of place literature has become a robust field of study since Relph’s *Place and Placelessness* (1976) and Tuan’s *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977) first set the tone among phenomenological researchers and humanistic geographers (Patterson & Williams, 2005). Relph (1976, p. 20) emphasized the importance of living in a place, engaging in the “multifaceted phenomenon of experience,” in order for such long and deep involvement to facilitate a sense of attachment (Shamai & Ilatov, 2004). Space is said to become ‘place’ as community attachments deepen through localized social networks and as personal meanings emerge in the context of a particular locale (Brehm, Eisenhauer & Kramnich, 2006; Stedman, 2003; Tuan, 1977). Senses of place are based on symbolic meanings attributed to the setting and, as

![Fig. 1. Map of University of Wisconsin – Madison Arboretum.](image-url)
Stedman (2003); p. 673) writes, “...it is possible for a single space to encompass multiple ‘places,’ reflecting the uniqueness of human culture and variations in experiences people have had with the landscape.”

Drawing on over two decades of research into toposphilia, or love of place (see Tuan, 1974), Williams (2008) has compiled a useful review of associated place concepts, theories, and philosophies from the perspective of natural resources management. Place research now encompasses a domain informed by multiple research traditions (Farnum et al., 2005) such as environmental psychology, sociology, geography (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001), and phenomenology of landscapes (Patterson & Williams, 2005). These efforts have contributed to an enhanced appreciation for the dynamic and emergent processes by which place meanings and attachments are formed (Eisenhauer, Kranich, & Blahna, 2000).

Whereas place attachment and place meaning are very closely related, especially when focused on the same geographical space, they are different. Many authors have used “place attachment” and “place meaning” interchangeably but Farnum, Hall, & Kruger (2005) point out that place meanings seem to encompass both symbolic and evaluative beliefs which order the physical world for the individual observer. Place attachment is described distinctly as an emotional bond, usually positive, that develops between people and the significant places in their lives (Low and Altman, 1992; Manzo, 2003; Moore and Graefe, 1994; Stedman, 2008).

Place meanings, the main focus of this article, represent a distinctive whole including the person, the environment, and the experience within a locale (Stewart, 2008). Meanings have been described as akin to stories about places rather than simple descriptions of physical properties of place (Williams, 2008). Personal connections to land tend to come through in stories told about meaningful places and convey something deeper than basic attitudes but nonetheless answer the question “What kind of place is this?” (Stedman, 2008). These stories emphasize the “relationship,” as Williams (2008) suggests, between a group or person and a place. Understanding these relationships among community stakeholders, using a psychological place-specific approach rather than simply an ecological site-specific approach, has been valuable in addressing issues of urban sustainability (Bonnes, Uzzell, Carrus, & Kelay, 2007).

Changes in the biophysical environment can impact place meanings. Research suggests that natural resources management discourse, in addressing a changing biophysical environment, should also consider the psychological impacts of such change on the individuals and adjacent communities (Rogan, O’Connor, & Horwitz, 2005; Ryan, 2005). Increased use of place-based research to inform public natural resource management decision-making also demonstrates the inherent political element of relationships with places (Cheng, Kruger, & Daniels, 2003; Kemmis, 1990; Williams, 2008).

Improved understanding of the human values associated with senses of place may affect environmental policy decisions ranging from issues of regional economic development to wilderness preservation and public land management (Beckley, 2003). Resource managers should be keenly interested in place meanings, suggests Stedman (2008). Managers can use these multifaceted meanings to understand the needs of diverse stakeholders and arrive at land use and policy decisions to more effectively accommodate the often competing meanings people and communities hold. To the extent that resource managers understand how users of recreational areas such as an urban arboretum combine different senses of place with the promotion of each user's sense of an environmentally aware self, managers have a powerful tool for adapting policies and information to meet the needs of various, sometimes competing, stakeholder groups (Cantrill, 2011; Cantrill & Senecah, 2001).

3. Study area

The University of Wisconsin Arboretum is 1260 acres of prairie, forest, lake and wetland ecosystems fully surrounded by urbanized commercial areas and residential neighborhoods. The UW Arboretum has been a place of scientific research since its founding in 1934 when, at its dedication, conservationist Aldo Leopold gave a speech proclaiming “perhaps we should not call the place an arboretum at all.” What Leopold (1934); p. 2) and colleagues were trying to create, he said, was “new and different.” Leopold stressed the goal of reconceiving what “a sample of original Wisconsin” was like “…before we took it away from the Indians” (Leopold, 1934; p. 3).

Created from what was formerly “two square miles of derelict farmland,” (Jordan, 1984; p. 2) the UW Arboretum is situated within the Lake Wingra watershed and is the first known attempt of a scientific prairie restoration project. The whole of the Lake Wingra watershed is home to over 33,000 people in 14 distinct neighborhoods. The watershed includes the UW Arboretum, the campus of a small private college, two nine-hole golf courses, six city parks, a large cemetery, several commercial districts, and numerous churches, schools, and community centers (Friends of Lake Wingra, 2005). Residents of the many surrounding neighborhoods are primarily white middle-class homeowners along with a socio-economically and culturally diverse array of college students, white-collar professionals, and lower- and middle-income renters.

4. Methods

Between late April and July of 2009, 37 phone calls were placed to members of a nongovernmental conservation advocacy group, the Friends of Lake Wingra (FOLW), living within the Lake Wingra watershed. FOLW administrators allowed researchers the use of their member list for purposeful sampling purposes (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). This technique might also be considered a homogeneous sampling method, according to Onwuegbuzie & Leech (2007), given the sample population all belonged to the same membership organization and were listed as living within the Lake Wingra watershed. Members of FOLW living outside of the watershed boundaries were excluded from the sample pool.

If a potential respondent did not answer the telephone at the time of the call, no message was left and the caller moved on to the next randomly designated call recipient on the list. Of those who answered the phone, three potential respondents declined to participate. A total of 16 respondents agreed to participate. Whereas this sample was not intended to be statistically representative, it does represent a cross-section of the population of interest (Davenport, Leahy, Anderson, & Jakes, 2007). Phone calls were discontinued upon having reached a perceived redundancy (i.e., theoretical saturation) in the answers to semi-structured interview questions, as determined by consultation between researchers. Though a sample size of 16 may seem small compared to most quantitative studies, it is not uncommon for qualitative work. When homogeneous samples are selected in qualitative research, Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) cite a recommendation by Kuzel (1992) for six-to-eight data sources as often being sufficient. Morse (1994) also suggests that, when the qualitative research goal is to understand the essence of experience, researchers should use at least six participants.

The use of open-ended questions (Table 1) to gain feedback from users of a natural area has precedent in Schroeder’s work in the Morton Arboretum near Chicago (Schroeder, 1991) as well as his work around the Black River area in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula (Schroeder, 1996). Davenport and colleagues have used a similar approach to exemplify an expanding body of qualitative research
exploring the human dimensions of natural resources management (Davenport & Anderson, 2005; Davenport et al., 2007). Questions used in these interviews were developed through a review of similar qualitative studies, centering on one by Davenport & Anderson (2005), and tailored to the specific locale of the Lake Wingra and UW Arboretum area.

Each respondent answered all ten open-ended questions on the semi-structured interview script. Follow-up and probing questions were asked as deemed pertinent by the interviewer to elicit a better understanding of the details presented. All calls were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

As interviews were collected, the authors of this study discussed the ongoing emergence of themes by reading the interview transcripts and taking notes on representative and/or repetitive phrases and themes. Research notes were first written down individually by researchers with the aim of identifying broad thematic elements and discrete meaning units for coding purposes. Words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs were identified in the transcript text as the process of analyzing the transcripts progressed. Researchers discussed their individual perceptions of discrete meaning units to further refine concepts into logical broad thematic categories, more specific subcategories, and nuanced descriptive properties. The goal in this stage of analysis was to assure that thematic interpretations by researchers were appropriate in tone and scope while accurately reflecting respondent intent and meaning. General thematic categories and subcategories evolved and are collectively represented by four main thematic areas described below.

5. Results

A range of place meanings having emerged from this study is described below. Interview excerpts are provided to exemplify these meanings. A diagram showing this spectrum of Arboretum Meanings (Fig. 2) was constructed to convey the interrelated connections across four broad themes: Nature, Sanctuary, Activity, and Society. These themes are introduced as the italicized words in the following paragraph. Each theme will be examined in greater detail in the sub-sections to follow. Table 2 also shows this same information broken down by both positive and negative associations. These categories intersect with few, if any, hard delineations and are not mutually exclusive.

The Arboretum as Nature implies a place people go to see plants and wildlife in a diversity of ecosystems such as forest, prairie, wetland, and lake. For some, it also represents a sort of wilderness that can be difficult to reign in, such as when deer and other wildlife eat neighborhood garden plants or when invasive species migrate across the fence lines separating private property from the public arboretum. Sanctuary is an indication of someplace special, a sort of sanctum sanctorum within the city where people can go, either alone or with others, to have time away from home and work. This sort of sanctuary invoked, for many respondents, a sense of the “Up North” lake cabin culture of Wisconsin’s north woods. Characteristics of “Up North” included notions of peacefulness, refuge from urban life, connection with nature, and a diversity of wildlife. Activity indicates the arboretum as a place for recreation and/or exercise. This was a very popular use for the area but also included some drawbacks such as rules prohibiting dogs on the premises. Perhaps the broadest category in this analysis is Society. This refers to the ‘public’ part of such an urban natural area, as well as the built environment of the vicinity surrounding the arboretum (roads, buildings, stormwater drainage systems, etc.). Sharing the land among a diversity of users, and possibly watching the land change over time, is part of using public space. These can be sources of both joy and tension among various user groups, especially if some patrons engage in behavior that is deemed unacceptable by others.

As a means of introduction to the broader thematic results, it is fitting to relate how most respondents recalled their own initial

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<td>Sanctuary</td>
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<td>Society</td>
<td>Community groups, Neighborhood proximity</td>
<td>Management decisions, development misbehavior</td>
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<td>Activity</td>
<td>Ski, Boat, Run, Hike, Bike, Birding, Beach</td>
<td>No dogs allowed</td>
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<td>Nature</td>
<td>Biodiversity, Seasons, Wildlife</td>
<td>Deer, Invasive plants</td>
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experiences with the UW Arboretum and Lake Wingra area. These are thematic trends that emerged across nearly all subject interviews.

Many people commented that they were introduced to the arboretum area, along with the city itself, through being a student at one of the area colleges. Some took a class that explored the arboretum or lake while others were introduced through more informal channels. A few respondents grew up in the neighborhood and were introduced at a young age through the influence of family and friends. Social relationships, as well as sensory experiences, played significant roles in nearly all introductory experiences and remained a strong element of long-term use.

One respondent recalled, “When I was a student, probably when the lilacs were in bloom, I think someone, a friend, might have said, ‘Hey, let’s go!’” Another respondent noted, “My dad was a botanist. He was actually chairman of an arboretum committee for a number of years. I went with my dad.” Still others recalled they were introduced to the arboretum and Lake Wingra area as adults because of a meeting held at the on-site visitor center or that, simply by virtue of moving to town and living nearby, started to explore the area on their own.

Memories of past times spent in the arboretum area seem central to each person's own construction of place meaning. As with the appreciation of the serene aesthetic qualities of the arboretum, memories of an ‘environmental past’ are a common element underlying nearly all meanings associated with this urban natural area. Notions of beauty and aesthetic appreciation were present in most place meanings associated with this arboretum and lake area. Examples of this appreciation can be found in nearly every category below and is an underlying component of most positive place meanings. A “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” sensibility also arose when respondents noted places that might appear ugly to others, such as a concrete tunnel connecting a trail beneath the highway, but that held special meaning for the speaker. All transcript excerpts below should be read as snapshots in the progress of meaning development relative to each respondent and their own journey of experience with this particular place.

5.1. Arboretum as nature

The natural elements of the arboretum and Lake Wingra area were the most consistently mentioned aspects of the area. Wildlife, seasonal changes, and blooming flowers in a variety of ecosystems were among the many positive aspects of the natural environment mentioned. Issues of concern, such as deer overpopulation and invasive plant species, indicate the complex relationship people have with such an urban natural area. This section first assesses some of the positive associations people discussed and is followed by some issues of concern.

When recalling time spent around the arboretum area, respondents were asked to name one or two of their most vivid memories. Flora and fauna figured into many vivid memories such as “early mornings seeing wildlife, especially turkeys,” “when the lilacs were in bloom,” and a time when “the toads were all singing at once.” In talking about the arboretum's spring awakening, one respondent described one “really incredible” experience “walking all winter long in the grey and white world and suddenly... an explosion of green.”

Social experiences in nature were also important. Many respondents recalled childhood activities such as birthday parties involving nature hikes; hiking with parents and friends while looking for or coming across wildlife; learning how to cross-country ski through the forests in the winter; and often “being surprised by something” such as a pair of cranes with chicks or a flock of wild turkey. The Lake Wingra area is often thought of as a year-round place within the city to “bond with nature without distractions.”

Even though natural elements of the area, which are described in the context of group and solo outings, were very often mentioned positively, feedback became critical when speaking about issues such as deer overpopulation and the spread of invasive plant species. The following respondent, earlier in the interview, referenced the arboretum as “a very valuable resource in a heavily congested area.” But soon his comment turned toward the negative:

The deer are coming into our yards, they’re eating our plants, and they are not being managed. People may think that this is a cutey thing to see. ‘Oh, look at the deer,’ but deer are pests. And, furthermore, it’s not healthy for them to achieve a population level like they have currently today. Something should be done about it. There’s no reason why you couldn’t have archers go into the arboretum and try to control the deer herd.

This contradictory representation — a valuable resource and a place where one disagrees with certain management policies — underscores the complexity of meanings individuals can hold. Of all the respondents in the survey, it should be noted that this respondent was the most openly hostile toward the arboretum and also lived closer to the property (across the street) than many of the other respondents.

Physical proximity to arboretum property has been shown to be both a benefit and a nuisance in terms of wildlife and vegetation migrating into residential neighborhoods. Some people see deer as symbols of beauty in the wild. Others, as represented by the quotes above, view them as pests. These comments also seem to be related to the notion of what belongs where. Deer and certain plants might be ok if they’re in the arboretum but, literally, ‘not in my backyard.’

A different respondent discussed her concern with some unwanted vegetation creeping across the property fence boundary:

There are some invasive plants like buckthorn that we get in our yard. I don’t know if it’s from our yard going into the arboretum or vice versa but it’s just kind of taking over that back area. It just doesn’t seem like this strip behind the houses ever gets weeded out.

5.2. Arboretum as sanctuary

Several respondents noted that the arboretum area was a special place, a “haven” within the city of Madison, a “great resource,” “retreat” or, as one respondent stated, a little bit of “nature in the city, like, actually natural space with enough width and breadth and diversity of plant groups and animal groups to really be an incredibly meaningful thing to living in a city like Madison.” An “amazing sort of palette of non-development along the Lake Wingra shoreline” is how a different respondent put it.

Some respondents noted the area’s “healing powers” and suggested that within the “green space” there was an “opportunity to take quiet walks and explore, an opportunity to learn” by observing the seasonal changes among the many deciduous trees, other plants, and migratory birds. Walking with children, looking for animals, and using it as an opportunity to talk about “nature and God” was recalled with particular fondness by another respondent.

When asked why some places within the arboretum might be considered special, responses often included comments on the diversity of plant and animal life and/or a sense of tranquility not otherwise available in the city. Statements such as “You can sit on the shore, and it’s like you’re ‘Up North’ or something,” were made by several respondents suggesting that the peacefulness and ease of northern Wisconsin’s cabin life was exemplified by the unique view of a relatively unbroken shoreline consisting of marsh grasses, conifers, birch and hardwood trees. The milieu of these natural
surroundings added meaning and was indeed a significant reason, for many, to seek out this place of sanctuary in the heart of an increasingly congested city. The “illusion of a wilderness lake right in town” and an “opportunity to bond with nature without distractions” speak to this as a special place within the city limits where the combination of Northwoods calm and urban convenience intersect to offer respite and reprieve.

When asked to name some of the “special places” in particular, many respondents recalled specific place-names. Descriptions included Curtis Prairie, 60 acres of the world’s oldest restored prairie; Gallistel Woods, a 28-acre plot of oak under- planted with sugar maple, basswood, and beech; Longenecker Gardens, a 50-acre area with over 2000 plants on display representing more than 100 of Wisconsin’s native woody plants; Teal Pond, a small pond centrally located on Arboretum property; Wingra Woods, 52 acres of oak, sugar maple, hemlock and yellow birch planted to resemble the sugar maple forests of northern Wisconsin; and the Wingra Springs area which includes “Big Spring” feeding fresh water to Lake Wingra and an attractive site for waterfowl. These places were all noted as special places for both the diversity of plants as well as the opportunity to see wildlife such as deer, turtles, frogs and birds such as turkey, songbirds, owls, Pileated woodpeckers, ducks, Sandhill cranes and geese.

5.3. Arboretum for activity

Typical uses for the arboretum area included both solitary and group recreational endeavors such as hiking, biking, running, cross-country skiing, non-motorized boating (kayak, canoe, paddle boat) and birding. Engagement with children and other family members emerged as a common practice in the wooded, prairie, and aquatic areas of the arboretum and at a nearby city park beach area during the summer months. One respondent’s reply exemplifies the multi-use approach many people have with the arboretum property: “I take walks, do birding, and enjoy the prairies. I do a little bit of kayaking on Lake Wingra. I also do volunteer work for my neighborhood, we started a prairie in the Lake Wingra watershed.”

Not all activity is welcome in the arboretum, however, even if it is perceived as relatively innocuous by some community members. One respondent discussed how she likes to ride bikes with her husband and take neighborhood children to the arboretum for nature hikes and wildlife viewing. She went on to discuss how she had been told by arboretum staff that she was not allowed on the property with her dog:

I hike with my dog. So I don’t go there anymore…. I really loved hiking it, but, you know, I’m a hiker and I like to go by myself sometimes when I have time and I like to take my dog. Now we go other places that allow dogs.

The multiple meanings held by individuals, such as this woman, who still enjoyed developing social ties with her young friends and her husband in the context of the arboretum’s natural environment, but had some hostility toward the “no dogs allowed” policy, exemplifies in one small way the complexity of associations community members have in relation the arboretum property. People enjoy the area’s naturalness and sharing time there with people who are considered special, even allowing for certain constraints on some behaviors such as the “no dogs” policy. Spending time with those who are special in turn adds value to the place as special.

Another respondent told of a special place for meeting with family in which even “ugly” aspects of the area became appealing over time. In this case, it was a concrete tunnel connecting two areas of arboretum property otherwise intersected by a major highway:

The tunnel is kind of a special place for our family because we meet our grandparents over at the tunnel entrance; it’s about halfway for both of us. Even though the tunnel itself is kind of ugly, that place is kind of special to us.

Many respondents enjoy the mix of the natural environment as a place to exercise as evidenced by one woman’s comments regarding her running routine:

Oh, gosh, I love it. I totally love it. [I am] not going to be able to put all of this in to words, but just running through there three times a week. Summer, spring, fall, winter, and seeing the seasons change. I mean, having that diversity, and the forest, the meadows and everything, just right here within half an hour walk or run from my house is just phenomenal. I mean, other places I’ve lived or other runs I’ve taken, it’s just not the same. I just love going out into nature and it’s so great to have nature right here and accessible in the middle of the city.

Engaging in activity such as running or other forms of exercise on a regular basis seem to serve as a way to deepen place connections through associations of the positive aspects of healthful activity and the positive benefits of time spent in the natural environment. Even though the woman quoted above later went on to recount potentially negative experiences with a running friend (e.g., getting drenched by a thunderstorm, being chased by a wild turkey), the place maintained its very positive meanings through the culmination of time and experience engaged in exercise and social connection with friends.

Exercise and recreation groups such as “running friends” were specifically named as common ways to enjoy the area within the context of a group. Winter activities such as cross-country skiing on the many trails or out on the ice to the middle of Lake Wingra for a unique view of the nearby state capitol dome provided further evidence of year-round enjoyment of the recreational and natural elements of the area.

5.4. Arboretum and society

While the ecological elements of this urban natural area emerged as a focal point of place-based meaning for neighborhood residents, the human dimension and aspects of the built environment also materialized as a significant point of reference. This section is divided into three parts to address different aspects of interactions between “society” and the land: Neighborhood Proximity, Management Decisions and Development, and Misbehavior on Public Land.

Excerpts regarding connectedness to personal property and neighborhood proximity to public land are included in the first subsection as well as issues associated with the impact of community groups in those neighborhoods. Decisions made by arboretum management and related issues of physical development in and around the arboretum area are addressed in the second subsection. Even though issues with misbehavior could conceptually be subsumed under the area of management decisions, given that it arose as a somewhat singular issue in the interviews, it is separated into its own category.

5.4.1. Neighborhood proximity

Nearly all respondents gave some indication that protecting the cleanliness of the arboretum and Lake Wingra area was at least somewhat important, and proximity to the lake and arboretum area was at least partially a factor in tendencies toward environmental protection. A greater sense of stewardship toward the health of the lake may grow out of living closer to it and contribute to what makes the surrounding neighborhoods unique and desirable areas.

When asked about potential connections of one’s neighborhood and/or home property to the arboretum, some respondents
claimed only limited connections. Others showed more in-depth knowledge about local initiatives, such as those to encourage the development of rain gardens and thus decrease stormwater runoff into the Lake Wingra basin. Even then, sometimes there was a perception of limited connectivity, such as: “I know there are some initiatives going on with the rain gardens, but, to be honest, other than that I don’t see a lot of connections.”

Others felt a more immediate connection through their personal property rather than the neighborhood as a whole and proximity to the lake seemed to be a factor: “I live here at least partly because I’m close to the arboretum and Lake Wingra. The water flows in. If you put your leaves in the street, then you’re adding nutrients to the lake.” Another person stated concern for chemical use while noting the value of close proximity:

We don’t use any chemicals on our lawn or anything because we know what rolls down our street ends up in Lake Wingra; if we ever tried to sell our house, one of the selling points is that we are so close. For someone who would care about being around nature, being close to the arb [sic] is definitely a plus.

The respondent here also opted to have a rain garden put in as a means of ecological protection:

…so the water would be filtered before it goes down in to Lake Wingra. In the winter time, I can see Lake Wingra when the leaves are off the trees. Yeah, I feel very connected. I’m not going to dump junk down the storm sewer or use fertilizers on the yard because, you know, I can see the lake from where I live. The city reconstructed Adams Street about two years ago, and that was just kind of an option. You could volunteer to have one or not. They made it really easy.

The extensive network of trails surrounding Lake Wingra, mostly on arboretum property, was often perceived as a benefit to the neighborhoods. The trail system was described by one respondent as a benefit to the neighborhood in this way:

It’s a short 2-min walk to the boat dock which picks up one of those [trails]. It’s basically the trailhead … and, like the Lake Wingra boat dock, it’s very close. I would consider it one of the biggest assets to actually owning a home in this area. We all live in pretty small 1930s half-lived-up homes and that ability to go and walk….I spend a lot of time in Europe and this is much more that European kind of feel. A lot of that has to do with the arboretum.

Proximity also became a consideration when respondents discussed whether or not it might influence the market value of their home. Nearly all thought of it as an asset, as suggested above, though some were not so sure:

...if you had a home that backed up to the arboretum, that used to be considered a real plus. Today, I’m not sure whether that’s considered a real plus…. I think that in general, people like the idea that there’s a buffer zone there; that it’s not going to be developed, that there’s a real effort to try and maintain the quality of the arboretum, albeit unsuccessful at this point.

Here the respondent shows that a single place can represent contradictory meanings. The arboretum represents a place of value, an aesthetically pleasing and largely undeveloped tract within the city, but is also perceived as a place where ecological quality has suffered, and nearby private property may have diminished value.

When asked about how residents felt they might be able to influence positive change regarding the management of the arboretum area, some expressed desires to affect change and others did not. Sound barriers were suggested, to block traffic noise from the nearby six-lane highway, as well as efforts to promote neighborhood and community awareness about arboretum programs. One neighborhood resident suggested:

A little more outreach, a little more community connection if and when possible. I feel like in our neighborhood, some people feel really connected to it and others surprisingly don’t. I think there’s probably not a lot of sort of neighborhood association connection to it, formal or informal. I think there could be more of that that could generally help people understand the value of it, what it’s about and what they could contribute.

Alternately, a different respondent suggests that those who perceive a stronger connection to the arboretum and its various happenings are likely those who are more “plugged in” to the communications system around it:

...our neighborhood association is always printing stuff about what’s going on in the arboretum and, you know, there’s a lot of people from Friends of Lake Wingra plugged in here and Edgewood College is kind of a participant in that. So we end up being very invested, I think, in the processes going on over there. I’m pretty aware that there’s a lot of work that goes into the way it’s being managed now....

5.4.2. Management decisions and development

Most respondents held at least moderate trust in development decisions made by arboretum management. Some were supportive of what was considered appropriate development, such as stormwater management projects by the city that ultimately affect water quality in Lake Wingra, but still expressed concerns such as:

I’m close to a new stormwater management project where they’ve dug out under and put in a much better stormwater pipe with a bunch of catch basins and some berms. You know, it was a good idea, but so far it’s only been managed by engineers and it looks like a business park. It was a shock to see how ugly it could get.

A different respondent notes skepticism but also trust in management decisions:

I know there’s a big project just real close to us here that’s under way. I guess I have mixed emotions. My thought about that one and the ones in general, that there are enough experts and bright people who I trust to think they are making good decisions. It’s a shame to see some things torn down and taken away and things kind of resurface and redeveloped in a new way. But … essentially I think it’s hopefully for the best. I’m a little cautiously optimistic.

Similarly, another respondent stated:

I don’t think I would influence it to actually change much at all knowing that the reason it’s so beautiful and there are so many different types of protected spaces — forests, prairie, water, etcetera — has to do with an immense amount of planning that’s already gone into it.

Some, however, suggested both appreciation and concern by stating that the arboretum management should “put up bigger fights about things,” especially in relation to a proposed high-voltage power line scheduled to be erected along the six-lane highway which separates the main body of the arboretum from the much smaller Grady Tract to the south:

…you know, the fact that they’re going to make the power line towers a little shorter so that you don’t see them as much when you’re in the arb [sic], I think just misses the point. So, I’d want them to be a little more tenacious about some things because, really, there is such a thing as being nibbled to death. There really is. The fight’s big enough; there are enough things that
have happened to change the internal landscape of the arboretum. This is such a wonderful area.

A large house being built near the arboretum was perceived by many respondents to be out-of-scale. Reactions such as “I hate the new house that’s been built there,” and “I’m not real thrilled with the big house built on Arboretum Drive,” it seems kind of out of proportion with its surroundings” are indicative of this negative sentiment towards disproportionate development projects. The house being mentioned is located along Arboretum Drive, the only road spanning most of the distance through much of the arboretum. Situated among a pocket of private property lots surrounded by arboretum property and very visible from the road, the perceived out-of-scale nature of this house seems to diminish the dominant North Woods aesthetic portrayed by most other houses in this secluded neighborhood.

5.4.3. Misbehavior on public land

An exception to the otherwise common sentiment regarding the benefits of proximity to the arboretum was represented by the man quoted previously who stated concerns about deer coming into his yard and eating his garden plants. He also suggested that it “used to be that you would feel safe going there with little kids. Now you just have a very strange element.” This respondent was singular among the sample population in alluding to this “strange element.” This man’s opinion suggests that misuse of the property, limited efficacy of law enforcement, and even perceived liberal political orientations of arboretum management have become concerns for at least some nearby residents:

The arboretum is changing and it’s being used by people who need their butt kicked out of there. I find that’s a deterrent because safety is a factor. I wouldn’t let my kids go through there without some sort of strong adult supervision. I’m talking about pervers. I’m talking about prostitution. It’s the police that need to go in there and clean up this mess. We’ve got a big apartment complex…that borders the arboretum and all sorts of nonsense takes place over there and it spills over into the arboretum. I mean, if I know about this stuff happening, anybody who’s been studying the arboretum has to know about this, too. There are all sorts of bad things that are going on. It’s just nonsensical. I mean, why should a beautiful part of the city, I mean its university owned; why should the university tolerate something like this? The reason they tolerate it is because they have no control. Even if they had the funds, I doubt if the University would do much about it because they’re just too liberal minded.

As suggested above, the previous quote represents an anomaly among respondents’ views. It is included because it suggests that, even among members of the Friends of Lake Wingra, there may be some dissention and disagreement related to arboretum management and policy.

6. Discussion

Excerpts and themes described above suggest varied sets of place-based meanings associated with an urban natural area in South Central Wisconsin as held by watershed residents who are also members of a local conservation advocacy group. Visitors use this lake and arboretum area in many ways, including recreation, sanctuary, interacting with nature and for social activities. These uses are often interrelated and can easily overlap, such as jogging through the forest in hopes of seeing wildlife. In tandem with these varied uses are parallel associated meanings. These meanings are generally positive but can also be hostile or ambivalent even among advocacy group members such as the Friends of Lake Wingra.

While perceptions of this urban natural area are mostly positive, concerns exist relative to several issues. These include misuse of public property, disproportionate or unsightly private or public-works development, control of the deer herd, and invasive species migration. These last two issues, deer and invasives, seem to be a more pressing concern for those living nearby or adjacent to arboretum property. Do property owners living adjacent or nearly-adjacent to the public/private border surrounding an urban natural area become more attuned to unique border issues such as misuse or ecological threats? We do not venture to answer such proximity-related questions in the present study though it is a line of questioning deserving further investigation.

Understanding concerns from surrounding neighborhoods is one way resource managers can potentially assuage negative public sentiment but, more importantly, such understanding can be used to directly address the issues of concern. In this particular case, it might mean proactively tasking work crews with the eradication of invasive plant species on the public/private boundary and/or raising public awareness of efforts to control the deer population.

The interviews for this study fulfilled our intention of speaking with an engaged group of watershed residents who are also members of an organized ecological advocacy group about the ongoing management and preservation of a local public and urban natural area. It is generally accepted that the goal of qualitative research is not to generalize beyond a sample to the larger population (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007) but often to compare sample populations of similar types. As such, results of the current analysis may be most effectively interpreted when studying similar conservation advocacy group membership populations or urban natural area contexts.

Though we believe this to be an informative and valuable look into the meanings held by an engaged user group, there were limitations to this study. Additional questions probing negative associations could have proven useful in identifying contradictory meanings such as those held by individuals who felt the area was a valuable asset yet disagreed with specific management practices.

It should not be surprising to find nature and aesthetics as underlying elements related to place meanings in this study and similar qualitative investigations. Similar results have been found by Schroeder (1991) studying Chicago-area arboretum users. Arboretum users here appreciated the area for its natural elements such as forests, paths, wetlands, and seasonal color changes. Stakeholders around other urban natural areas have also been found to appreciate the natural attributes of the area more than those elements perceived to be incompatible with nature such as visible power lines or out-of-scale development (Ryan, 2005). Additionally, urban natural areas such as the UW Arboretum rely on University and state funds to pay for improvements and maintenance of their varied ecosystems and amenities. Particularly during periods of shrinking budgets, highlighting how taxpayers benefit from urban natural areas may help make a compelling case for why funding should be preserved to continue to offer the benefits they provide. Urban natural areas also rely on private donations to fund the services they offer. Highlighting place meanings that resonate strongly with people who use such areas, tapping into positive memories and emotions related to past experiences, can inform messaging strategies that appeal to people willing to donate time and financial resources for restoration, preservation and improvement projects.

Furthermore, the stated mission of many urban natural areas such as the UW Arboretum includes specific mention of fostering a land ethic, educating the public about the value of nature, and promoting an appreciation of biodiversity. Understanding the ways “Friends of...” groups connect with urban natural areas can help managers offer events and craft messages to more effectively
engage these concerned stakeholder groups, thereby fulfilling their organizational missions more successfully. Research on stakeholder groups can also assist in informing public communication campaigns. Through this, conservation advocacy groups can capitalize on an area’s inherent biodiversity and build a sense of connection, pride, and support for land management agencies (Bott, Cantrill, & Myers, 2003).

This study should be viewed as one source of input within the larger ongoing discourse related to management, planning, and public involvement regarding urban natural areas. These results provide insight on aspects of the relationship between members of the “Friends of Lake Wingra” and the UW Arboretum and Lake Wingra natural area. Insights add to a rich history of research on place meanings, expand on theoretical understanding of how people connect with urban natural areas, and provide actionable insights about how to more effectively manage these areas in response to divergent meanings ascribed to a single location.

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