Culturally Reflexive Stewardship: Conserving Ways of Life

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Abstract and Keywords

This article is concerned with caring for place, the interweaving of community, landscape, and culture. Culturally reflexive stewardship (crs) involves actions to sustain a way of life, motivated by a shared appreciation of place, landscape, and region, and expressed through practices that transmit cultural knowledge and affirm a social identity. The article first contrasts two resource regimes, one based on a logic of tradeoffs and markets, the other on a logic of stewardship. Second, it presents the key characteristics of crs, emphasizing the linkage of intellectual content (local knowledge) with an ethical imperative based in the symbolic qualities of place. Finally, the article explores the relationship of stewardship to social organization, and offers examples of crs in three modes, termed “living in place,” “conservation and recovery,” and “polarization and protest.”

Keywords: stewardship, way of life, place, landscape, conservation, culture, local knowledge

Introduction

This essay is concerned with caring for place, the interweaving of community, landscape, and social memory. It is intended as a cross-disciplinary communiqué from a cultural anthropologist to colleagues specializing in heritage conservation and interpretation. From an anthropological perspective the sites and landscapes that are the concern of heritage research and practice are special cases of a far broader human capacity to transform physical *space* into inhabited *place* (Tuan 1977). The emphasis here is on this wider domain of social life, in a sense building on the principles recognized in the

ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites (ICOMOS 2008), which acknowledged the role of living communities in interpreting the meaning and considering the authenticity of sites and landscapes.

Two objectives shape the direction of this essay, the first theoretical, the second practical. First, I emphasize approaches that can clarify the nature of the connections binding community and place, treating these as elements of *coupled human and natural systems*. From this perspective, {humans—communities—social organization} and {nature—landscape—environment} are given equal analytic weight, and through their mutual influence constitute a single system, considered at a variety of spatial and temporal scales (Liu et al. 2007: 639). Second, I examine how the ties of community and place can foster actions intended to conserve a way of life—the shared experience of living in a certain manner, in a certain place—making local agency a matter of practical as well as theoretical concern.

Here is an example. In southeastern Oregon in the mid-1980s the US Department of Energy undertook an environmental cleanup of radioactive mill tailings, a legacy of uranium mining and milling. This required collecting, transporting, and storing over 700,000 tons of radioactive waste.[1] One of the storage sites under final consideration lay at the base of a mountain holding significant associations for a Northern Paiute Indian community. Voicing strong opposition, the tribal government stated in a letter to the Energy Department: “It was at these sites (Drake Peak, Hart Mountain, and Steens Mountain) that members of the aboriginal Northern Paiute Bands sought communion with the Ancient Power. And it is at these same sites, like the Drake Peak area, that now, centuries later, Gidutikad people continue to seek spiritual help” (in Winthrop 1990: 129). As one elder said to me:

> Mr. Washoe: We pray to the mountain. We pray when we drink the water that comes off the mountain. That’s our God. Everything on the mountain. […]
>
> Winthrop: You said that Drake Peak was sacred. Is that right … there’s spirits there?
>
> Mr. Washoe: Yeah, that’s the old Indians. They never leave. They’re over there now. All the dead Indians. Their spirits are still there.
>
> (Winthrop 1990: 129)

What follows is organized in three parts. First, I consider two resource regimes which reflect fundamentally different ways of understanding the relation between people, place, and meaning. One is based on a logic of tradeoffs and markets, the other on a logic of stewardship. Second, I present the key characteristics of culturally reflexive stewardship (CRS) as a specific expression of stewardship ethics, consider its relationship to social organization, and offer examples of CRS in three modes, which I term “living in place,”

"conservation and recovery," and "polarization and protest." Third, I consider the implications of these arguments for theory and practice.

The Logic of Stewardship

There are multiple ways to organize the control and use of land. In the logic of tradeoffs, the world of environmental goods is vast, but nothing is unique or irreplaceable. Markets for land and resources are based on this principle. In 1953 Disneyland was built on 160 acres of former orange and walnut orchards in Anaheim, California.[2] Disneyland quickly became one of the world's most popular amusement parks—in 2015 the park welcomed over 18 million visitors.[3] These 18 million visitors—or more correctly, the money these 18 million visitors paid annually to be entertained—define the value of Disneyland, vastly exceeding the value of the orchards it replaced.

In contrast, the value of America's Civil War battlefield at Gettysburg has a very different basis: historical events and their shared symbolism in American life. As Mark Sagoff noted of Gettysburg, "to say that the nation has a duty to pay homage to those from whom it received the last full measure of devotion is to state a moral fact," not to report an economic preference (Sagoff 2004: 39). Americans recognize the value of Gettysburg primarily as *citizens*, just as Buddhists recognize Sarnath and Jews recognize Jerusalem as members of those religious communities. Over a million visitors travel to Gettysburg each year.[4] Yet if the number of visitors were reduced to zero, Gettysburg would retain its value in American life. Here a conventional economic account of value is irrelevant.

Anonymity, alienability, and fungibility are key attributes in the logic of tradeoffs, particularly as elaborated through neoclassical economic analysis (Pritchard, Folke, and Gunderson 2000: 38). In contrast, for the Northern Paiute community contesting the siting of radioactive waste, or for Americans respecting the sacrifice commemorated at Gettysburg, none of these attributes apply. Rather than anonymity, the social identity of those asserting the value of place and heritage is fundamental. Rather than alienability, long-term responsibility for a place or landscape is both a virtue and an obligation. Rather than fungibility, such places and landscapes have unique significance for particular families, communities, or even nations. In the words of an old advertising slogan, they "accept no substitute."

This contrast can be developed further by considering *resource regimes*, the rules and institutional structures that shape the control and management of land and resources, including rights of access, use, and sale (Vatn 2005: 252–257). The problem of identifying which regime best fits a particular set of circumstances can be examined along three dimensions (after Vatn 2005: 419–422). A first dimension concerns the *aims* of managing a resource: whether this involves an individual logic maximizing personal advantage, or a social—cooperative logic seeking a collective benefit. A second dimension involves the form of *interaction and choice*: whether this is technical—instrumental, involving explicit

criteria (how to maximize return on investment), or deliberative, weighing matters of symbolic and ethical complexity (applying broad cultural principles to determine action in specific circumstances). A third dimension involves the *nature of the good* being managed: whether private (a single-family home) or some variant of shared or public good (commonly held pasture).

The conditions of individual rationality, instrumental choice, and private goods define the logic of tradeoffs—the world of markets. In contrast, the conditions of social rationality, deliberative choice, and shared, common-pool, or public goods are consistent with the logic of stewardship. Yet while this analysis defines a space for stewardship within a typology of resource regimes, it does not capture the subjective experience of the Paiutes' concern for Drake's Peak, or many Americans' reverence for Gettysburg. Understanding these aspects requires another perspective.

Culturally Reflexive Stewardship

For Aboriginal communities of Australia, the English word *country* refers to:

> the traditional habitat of a particular group … but implies not only geographic territory but human interaction with it. *Country* is more than dirt and rock; it is alive, it is part of interaction, it has its myths and songs and traditions that are proper to it and necessary to its continued health. It is humanized landscape.… Ownership of country is complex but strict and elaborately worked out; it entails a firm requirement for the owners to manage the landscape as well as they can to maintain productivity … Country is crossed by countless tracks ("songlines") of mythic and historic creators. These tracks were well known, as were the stories associated with them, which often included detailed recommendations about the treatment and management of particular areas.
>
> (Anderson 2014: 99).

If stewardship as commonly understood involves "the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care" (Barrett 1996: 11), the Aboriginal notion of *country* involves a far more specific sense of relationship and care, a more specific linking of human and natural systems. Nor is the Aboriginal example unique. While the specifics of place, belief, and moral obligation vary, the depth and intensity of this relationship are found in societies around the world. As Keith Basso notes in his masterful ethnography of Western Apache cultural landscapes, "Apaches view the landscape as a repository of distilled wisdom, a stern but benevolent keeper of tradition, an ever-vigilant ally in the efforts of individuals and whole communities to maintain a set of standards for social living" (Basso 2007: 62–63).

The type of "caring for place" reflected in these examples I term *culturally reflexive stewardship* (CRS).[5] As a working definition, CRS involves *actions to sustain a way of life, motivated by a shared appreciation of place, landscape, and region, and expressed through practices that transmit cultural knowledge and affirm a social identity*.[6] Place, landscape, and the narratives that describe them are affective and compelling: affective in carrying strong emotional content and compelling in exerting moral obligation. These qualities derive in part from the "forest of symbols" that grows from the linkage of human ideas about the world with their tangible qualities, joining ideological and sensory aspects of environmental experience, and expressed with particular intensity through ritual (Turner 1967: 29–30).

In many societies, water offers such a symbol, linking personal experience to landscape. Among American Indian communities of the arid Columbia Plateau (US Pacific Northwest), water can be a "medicine," possessing healing properties when gathered from streams at particular elevations in a mountain environment. Traditional meals in these communities still begin with a sip of water and an exclamation of thanks: in the Sahaptin language, *čuuš* ("water!"). In the hierarchy of native environmental values on the Columbia Plateau, water is "primordial and ultimate" (Schuster 1975: 436).

Whose Land—Whose Knowledge?

Thus far stewardship has been examined without considering the social systems that shape attachment to places and landscapes. Communities are seldom if ever fully consistent in cultural outlook or unified in solidarity (McCay 2001). Multiple groups may value the same landscape, or at least the same environment. As migration, conflict, conquest, and displacement are recurring themes of history, it follows that there are few tracts of land claimed or revered by only a single group. In the case of the San Pedro River watershed in southeast Arizona, at least four tribes have ties to this landscape: Hopi, Zuni, Tohono O'odham, and Western Apache, each using this "in the construction of contemporary social identity and in the retention and transmission of historical knowledge" (Ferguson and Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2006: 27).

Indigenous and non-indigenous groups may encounter the same landscape in quite different ways. Crater Lake, in the southern Oregon Cascades, is a volcanic caldera important for Klamath and several other American Indian tribes of the region. Primarily it was a place of power and peril, renowned as a spirit quest site, but also feared for the dangerous beings residing in the lake, described in a number of Klamath myths. First encountered by Anglo travelers in the 1850s, Crater Lake admirably met their desire for a sublime and inspiring experience of nature. One visitor wrote, "It is at once weird, fascinating, enchanting, repellent, of exquisite beauty and at times terrifying in its … oppressing stillness" (in Winthrop 1997: 7). Both American Indians and Euro-Americans recognized the alien and numinous in this ancient caldera. Unlike the Indian visitors to

Crater Lake, Euro-Americans lacked the cultural models—the cognitive templates encompassing myths, rituals, and knowledge of local spirit beings—which allow such encounters to yield a message, to produce lasting understanding and personal change.

An example from New Zealand illustrates the ways in which expressions of stewardship can be shaped by both political and ethnic differences. In *Calling the Station Home* Michele Dominy provides a vivid account of sheep pastoralism in the High Country of New Zealand's South Island. These sheep farmers are New Zealanders of European descent, leasing Crown lands. As such their identity is framed by a double contrast: as Europeans in contrast to native Maoris who contest their rights to leases in the High Country; and as ranchers in contrast to environmental advocates who wish the High Country to be managed for aesthetic and ecological values, freed from productive human uses. For many contemporary *pakeha* (non-Maori) New Zealanders, social identity is in flux as they, along with indigenous Pacific peoples, "are simultaneously exploring what it means to have a Pacific identity" (Dominy 2001: 27). This is evident in a statement by one of the sheep farmers profiled in *Calling the Station Home*: "After 25 years working in the back country as a shepherd and then after a lucky break, as a lessee, I still look every day with a feeling of awe on the mountains, the rivers and the bush that make up our high country lands. My hope is that this awe, felt no doubt by many men and women, will transcend so called cultural differences and unite us, so we will go into the next decade as one, with the best management of our fragile resources as a collective goal" (in Dominy 2001: 221).

Stewardship Outcomes

CRS is manifested in a variety of ways, reflecting the degree of social and political polarization, and the presence or absence of forced environmental change. I consider these under three somewhat arbitrary categories: living in place, conservation and recovery, and polarization and protest.

Living in Place

Writing of Appalachian communities in rural Virginia, Melinda Wagner comments, "Here land is social space…. [it] is identified with the people who have lived there; the land is given meaning by the human activities that have happened and are happening on it" (Wagner 2002: 125). Conversations that touch on locations and directions refer to named geological features or local landmarks with cultural resonance, not state or county road numbers. Even in giving directions to strangers, a reference to "John's road" is more likely than "Route 624" (Wagner 2002: 125).

The undramatic, everyday quality of this Appalachian example suggests why stewardship as “living in place” is widespread, important, and yet easily overlooked. As Yi-Fu Tuan observed regarding a sense of *homeland*, “Attachment of a deep though subconscious sort may come simply with familiarity and ease, with the assurance of nurture and security, with the memory of sounds and smells, of communal activities and homely pleasures accumulated over time” (Tuan 1977: 159).

Conservation and Recovery

Stewardship is more obvious in cases of deliberate efforts to conserve local knowledge and practices. Many American Indian tribes sponsor culture camps for young people to provide an organized way to share traditional knowledge, impart skills, and provide language instruction. The Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians in northern Michigan offers a range of programs throughout the year at the Mary Murray Cultural Camp, including “camps for winter survival, sugar bush, lodge teachings and smoked fish; workshops to make moccasin, baskets and moose hide mittens; and field trips such as sweetgrass, birch bark, and medicine picking.”[7] In Sand Point, Alaska, in the Aleutian Islands, the Qagan Tayagungin Tribe sponsors an annual culture camp for kindergarten through twelfth grades. Classes include basket weaving, net mending, Aleut dance, and preparing tradition foods.[8]

Community-based environmental monitoring can also serve to enhance awareness and appreciation of a local environment. Potential benefits include increased scientific literacy, social capital, and citizen participation in environmental management (Conrad and Hilchey 2011: 279–281), all of which can support stewardship. Keeping Track is an environmental nonprofit operating primarily in Vermont and New Hampshire, which trains citizens to observe and inventory wildlife, particularly wide-ranging mammals such as black bears and bobcats. The aim is to provide data to support local and regional plans to maintain or enhance species habitat (Mitchell and Diamant 2001: 221–223).

Bioregionalism offers a program for cultural/ecological conservation and recovery through a commitment to place, at the scale of biogeographical regions and watersheds. As the poet Gary Snyder wrote, bioregionalism “calls us to see our country in … its whole natural history before the net of political jurisdictions was cast over it” (in Lockyer and Veteto 2013: 9). Ozark bioregionalism provides an interesting example because of the merging of traditional ecological knowledge and practices with contemporary economic and environmental concerns, the multiplicity of practical activities established, and the explicit contrast between unsustainable urban living and what is perceived to be a more responsible and sustainable rural way of life.

As an intentional movement, Ozark bioregionalism dates to the 1970s, as back-to-the-land ex-urbanites sought a simpler, more ecologically sustainable life. Traditional Ozark communities are characterized by simple living, innovation, and a reliance on local resources and ecological knowledge. Contemporary Ozark homesteaders sought to adopt

these traits by choice (Campbell 2013: 59). Here CRS is manifested through a range of practical actions. These include regional organizing (the Ozark Area Community Congress), an entity promoting responsible waste management (the National Water Center), a research station (the New Life Farm), the Ozark Regional Land Trust, the Ozark Organic Growers Association, and a community loan fund (Financing Ozarks Rural Growth & Economy) (Campbell 2013: 67–72).

Polarization and Protest

The ties of CRS can prompt political as well as legal opposition to imposed environmental change. Where more conventional responses prove ineffective, demonstrations and civil disobedience may follow.

Pollution in North America's Great Lakes prompted two Canadian Anishinaabe women elders to lead "Water Walks" to raise awareness. Beginning with a walk around Lake Superior in 2003, the Water Walks had by 2017 included all of the Great Lakes, and several other lakes and rivers, on both Canadian and US territory.[9] The walks involve an Anshinaabe water ceremony and a feast, with participating grandmothers taking turns to carry a water vessel and eagle staff (Whyte 2016: 573–574). "The goal of each walk is to raise awareness about water and to change the perception of water from that of a resource to that of a sacred entity" (McGregor 2012: 13).

Indian fishing rights in America's Pacific Northwest have been a source of legal and political controversy for more than a century. The anadromous salmon that travelled along the Columbia and other rivers of the region, including chinook, coho, sockeye, and steelhead, provided abundant and valued food for Indian communities. Moreover, fishing was a critical cultural practice. Being a skilled fisherman involved detailed knowledge of the various runs of fish, the characteristics of particular fishing sites, their mythical associations, the respect with which the fish must be treated, and the norms and values that governed sharing of the catch. By the late nineteenth century Anglo settlements blocked Indians from many traditional fishing sites. Over the next century commercial fishing took an ever-larger share of the salmon catch, while construction of a series of dams on the Columbia River injured or killed a sizeable proportion of the salmon runs (Hunn and Selam 1990: 148–155). State regulations also served to restrict Indians' rights to fish, despite the strong protections afforded by treaties.

From the early 1940s, Indian fishermen undertook acts of civil disobedience, for example, challenging state regulations that prohibited use of a dip net. Beginning in the 1960s, tactics shifted from individual acts of defiance to group actions of non-violent civil disobedience—"fish-ins"—gatherings at customary fishing sites to fish without state licenses, courting arrest. As the name implied, the "fish-in" was influenced by the "sit-in" of the Civil Rights movement unfolding in the American South (Parham 2013: 11–13). Some of the acts of civil disobedience led to landmark federal rulings in the 1970s that greatly strengthened the fishing rights of Pacific Northwest tribes (Hunn and Selam

1990: 284–294). The combination of legal and political action across the Pacific Northwest helped affirm social identity as native peoples of the region. As Vera Parham has noted, “each counter move against protesters, each rebuttal in the court room, embedded the expanding and multiple identities as fishermen and fisherwomen into Pacific Northwest Native American consciousness” (Parham 2013: 12).

Implications

What CRS conserves.

The specific situations linking communities and landscapes vary widely: the Northern Paiutes sought to maintain Drake Peak as a place of spiritual power; Indian tribes of the Pacific Northwest sought to preserve access to traditional fishing sites and practices. Yet there is a common intention underlying these disparate actions: preserving the basis for a way of life. The latter aim could be termed second-order cultural choice. In this sense, *first-order choice* involves the ability to undertake particular practices; *second-order choice* involves the ability to conserve the physical and cultural context within which these practices remain meaningful. Traditions can be transmitted to the extent that they can be enacted (Winthrop 2002: 165–173).

Linking communities and landscapes.

For western observers, the notion of landscape carries the pictorial assumptions of European aesthetics: landscape as an attractive depiction of rural scenery. Yet as considered here cultural landscapes are far more than vistas: they have intellectual content, reproduced through local practice and beliefs (Ferguson and Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2006: 27). The former perspective is captured in the Anglo travelers’ reaction to Crater Lake: emotion without the cognitive dimension of cultural knowledge. For most of the communities considered here, in contrast, the affective and compelling qualities of stewardship stem from linking traditional knowledge of place and region with perception of their tangible qualities.

Contrasting logics of place.

CRS was introduced by contrasting the logic of tradeoffs and the logic of stewardship, where assumptions of individual rationality, instrumental choice, and private goods contend with an alternate perspective involving social rationality, discursive choice, and shared goods. The contrast is most apparent where dominant legal principles conflict with those of less powerful, enclaved, often indigenous groups, as with American Indian struggles to secure fishing rights. Many conflicts over claimed cultural rights stem fundamentally from disagreement over which logic should prevail. Yet it is also important to recognize that the logic of tradeoffs and the logic of stewardship may compete within a single social system. Anglo ranchers in the American West offer a notable example, many of whom pursue ranching as a way of life shaped by ties of community and landscape,

rather than pursuing the more profitable uses of their land suggested by a logic of tradeoffs and markets (Sheridan 2007: 129–133).

Implications for heritage research and practice.

Place and landscape have been foundational concepts for heritage studies. I argue for considering explicitly the social systems that frame the experience and shape the value of place. I suggest further that the phenomenon of stewardship can contribute to a better understanding of the integration of human and natural systems. Translating this into the context of heritage management, where "significance" (historical, archaeological, or cultural) looms large, we should be as concerned to ask *how* sites and landscapes become significant for communities (a question of social and semiotic process) as to ask *why*. This is a multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary endeavor, to which heritage scholars have much to contribute.

The examples of stewardship considered here involve systems of knowledge about places and landscapes. Such systems are often referred to as "local," "traditional," or "indigenous" knowledge, and as such contrast with (mainstream) scientific knowledge in such fields as geology, botany, or wildlife ecology. Since the 1990s interest has grown in finding ways to integrate these disparate forms of knowledge, though such efforts are challenged by formidable epistemological and organizational barriers (Ross et al. 2011: chs 1–3). There are good reasons to seek this integration, for the two worlds of knowledge have much to offer one another. Nonetheless there is a risk in exploring the compatibility of such systems while failing to acknowledge their fundamental difference. This is the ethical dimension of much local or traditional knowledge, the affective and compelling qualities which provide the motive force for stewardship.

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([4]) Gettysburg—Adams Chamber of Commerce: Tourism. URL: <http://www.gettysburg-chamber.org/business-resources/tourism> [accessed April 24, 2017].

([5]) For examples of CRS from American Indian communities of the Pacific Northwest, see Winthrop 2014.

([6]) Whether a particular form of stewardship actually promotes objectively defined conservation outcomes is a matter for investigation. This point needs emphasis, particularly when citing examples from indigenous communities, given the sometimes romanticized notions of indigenous peoples as inherently “exemplary conservationists” (Ross et al. 2011: 84–92, Smith and Wishnie 2000).

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