

The Sutter Buttes: Attachments to the Land

Antonio E. Valdes
Humboldt State University

Abstract

The Sutter Buttes are an isolated group of lava domes jutting out of California's flat Central Valley. They are a publicly valued icon, and have been compared to natural wonders such as Crater Lake and Yosemite, but unlike those icons, access into the Buttes is currently limited to authorized individuals and private landowners (Martin 1991). In 2003 the California Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks) purchased 1,785 acres in the northern portion of the Buttes (CapRadio 2007). However, because the property is surrounded entirely by private land, the park is currently not available for public use (Rogers 2013). As a result, State Parks has offered many of the surrounding landowners exorbitant prices for their properties, with the intention of augmenting these properties to the park. By doing so, the state hopes to eventually border a county road, thus making the park accessible to the public. However, as of yet, no landowners have sold their properties to the state. This research investigates landowners' sense of place, and, more specifically, reveals that a positive sense of place is a strong factor influencing a number of the landowners' decisions to retain the titles to their properties.

THE SUTTER BUTTES' PROMINENCE above the surrounding plains, their nearly perfect circular arrangement, and their geologic distinctiveness from other mountain ranges makes them anything but normal. Indeed, the physical features of the so-called "smallest mountain range in the world" are unique, but it is the human decisions surrounding these physical features that have allowed the Buttes to retain their character as an undeveloped rangeland.

The Sutter Buttes are a series of volcanic peaks situated in the middle of California's Central Valley, a mere fifty miles north of Sacramento (Figure 1). The Buttes, which are the valley's only major topographic feature, span ten miles across and have a total area of seventy-five square miles, a little more than one-and-a-half times larger than San Francisco (California Department of Parks and Recreation 2005, 3).

Because of their distinctiveness and isolation, the Sutter Buttes have garnered substantial cultural significance. They are a familiar icon in the neighboring



Figure 1.—Location of the Sutter Buttes. The nearest urban areas are Yuba and Marysville. Road generalization based on map featured in Laney and Coats 2005.

cities of Yuba City, Marysville, and Live Oak. Their namesake and silhouette is featured prominently on the signs, business names, street names, and billboards of that region (Figure 2). According to Peterson, “symbols and images” such as those of the Sutter Buttes “contribute to defining social groups’ identities, as well as influencing individual identities,” thus contributing to the local sense of place (Peterson 1983, 3). In addition, the mountains also hold religious significance to the Maidu and the Wintun peoples, who believe that one’s soul returns to the Buttes after death (Stacy 2010). Moreover, hikers from San Francisco, Chico, and Sacramento come to the area in droves for the opportunity to attend a guided hike into the mountains. This is unsurprising, given that the peaks have been compared to renowned natural wonders such as Crater Lake and Yosemite (Martin 1991). However, unlike those natural icons, the Buttes are not open for the general public to explore freely. To visit the Buttes, one must join one of the guided tours, typically with an organization called Middle Mountain Interpretive Hikes. This is because the vast majority of the Buttes lie in the hands of roughly 150 small-property owners and about dozen families with properties that are 1,000 acres or larger, many of whom have ancestral ties to their lands that stretch as far back as 100 years (GreenInfo Network 2001; Hausback et al. 2011).

There is a large exception to the private land in the Buttes; it is a 1,785-acre State Park in the northern portion of the range that was purchased in 2003



Figure 2.—Local real-estate advertisement featuring the Sutter Buttes. Ads, business names, and logos featuring the Buttes are common in Yuba City, Live Oak, and Marysville.

(Figure 3) (Rogers 2013). The California Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks) purchased the property from private hands for \$2.9 million, which according to one of the Buttes landowners was “way above the going price of anything around.” But despite being over a dozen years old, the park has never officially opened its gates because it is completely landlocked by private properties (Meer 2011). Only Park officials may enter the park through an unpaved private road that transects some of the private properties (CapRadio 2007).

State officials have reportedly offered exorbitant prices to many of the surrounding landowners for their properties. The state’s hope is that they can annex enough land to the landlocked park so that it will eventually border a county road, thus becoming accessible. In the words of retired State Park spokesperson Roy Stearns, “If land becomes available from a willing seller, absolutely we’d be interested. We’re most interested in giving the present lands we own now access to a county road” (CapRadio 2007). One of the landowners I spoke with claimed that a State Park official told him, “We’ll be willing to buy any property you’ll sell us, you just name your price, because we would like access to the state park we bought.” Despite these offers, no landowners have sold their properties to the state since the original purchase of the park, back in 2003. It might be reasonable to conclude that it is eco-

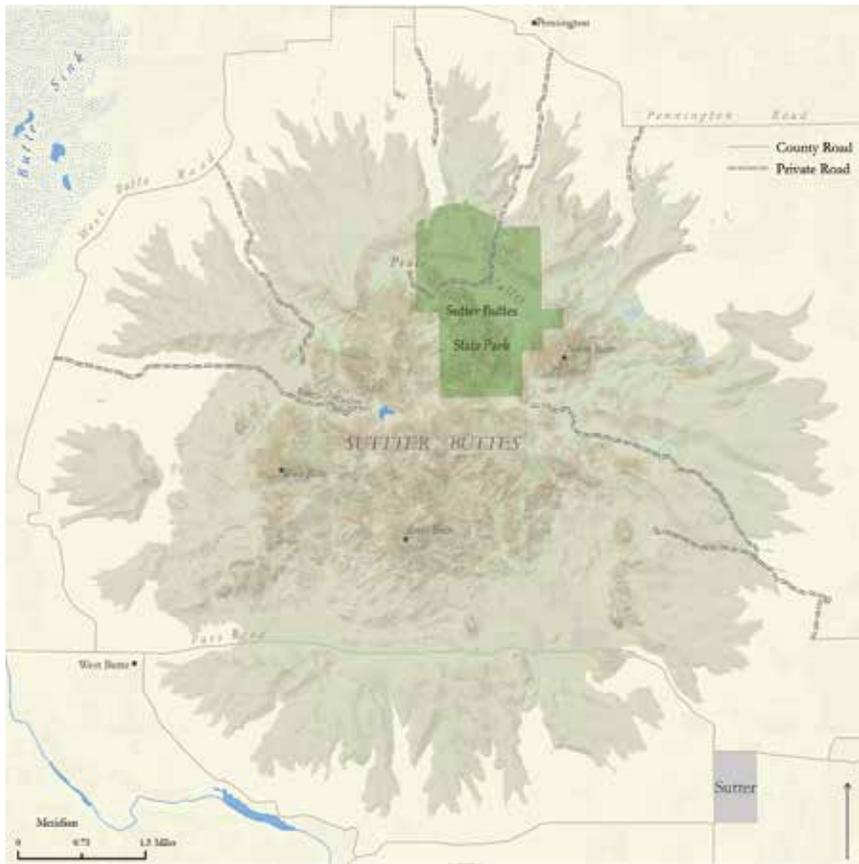


Figure 3.—Location of Sutter Butte State Park, featuring private roads surrounding the property.

nomically beneficial for the landowners not to sell their properties. However, landowners often do not make very much money from grazing, the primary land-use practice in the Buttes. One of the property owners even claimed “the money we get from rent, the cattle rent, doesn’t even pay the property taxes, so we have to bring in money from elsewhere to maintain fences, and so it’s a burden.” Therefore, the landowners’ reasons for holding onto their properties must extend beyond financial motivations. This research supports this statement, revealing that landowners often have a positive sense of place that creates emotional bonds to their lands, emotional bonds that supersede the economic benefits offered by State Parks.

Literature Review

The amount of literature explicitly dedicated to the opposition of conservation areas is strikingly sparse. The majority of this literature focuses on the Global South, where it is often the case that the central state will conserve areas that were once the primary resource bases for indigenous communities (Neumann 1998; Frias and Meridith 2004; Holmes 2007). Holmes compiles much of this literature and synthesizes it with resistance studies. Resistance studies portray the weaker classes’ seemingly small, day-to-day acts of resistance as important symbolic statements against the dominant class that often have significant reverberations (Fletcher 2001; Jean-Klein 2001; Ortnor 2006). In conservation areas, resistance may take the form of continued practice of agriculture in conservation areas, hunting, and/or slash and burn practices. Holmes and others provide two contributions to academia: (1) they emphasize the importance of resistance theory in conservation areas, and (2) they illustrate how conservation areas imposed by distant authorities, e.g., governments and NGOs, often overlook the needs of locals. However, this literature does not cover contemporary conservation issues in the Global North that undoubtedly have many nuanced differences that need to be explored.

The focus of more Western-oriented literatures typically centers on the history, success, or failure of conservation areas themselves, while resistance to conservation usually takes the role of side-character at best. An exception to this rule is Hampton’s historical analysis of opposition to National Parks (1981). He highlights four primary motivations for opposing National Parks: (1) economic opposition, (2) “parks are for the elite” opposition, (3) bureaucratic opposition from internal governmental agencies, and (4) miscellaneous opposition. These oppositions are very broad and tend to ignore nuanced feelings of locals in the immediate surrounding areas, including their sense of place.

Unlike other literatures on the Global North, Mittlefehldt focuses her article on the people affected by one specific conservation area: the Appalachian Trail. She infers that her case study is representative of how conservation tactics in the United States have shifted over the past century (2010). Using the acquisition of the trail by the National Park Service illustrates how hard-line policies often used in the 1970s, such as eminent domain, evolved into more successful public-private partnerships. For example, the project gained greater support when it became framed as “a community-based initiative rather than a federal mandate” (Mittlefehldt 2010, 655). Furthermore, private landowners responded more positively to local volunteers and greenspace

advocates than they did to federal employees. Ultimately, these tactics were not only more successful in gaining landowners' approval but also proved easier for the National Park Service itself, and have become dominant tactics employed by many conservation organizations today.

Mittlefehldt's findings may explain why local interpretive organizations in the Sutter Buttes have been more successful at working with landowners than the State. Indeed, Wotkyns' work reinforces this hypothesis as well. In Wotkyns' anecdotal essay set in Trinidad, California, he describes the overwhelmingly negative reaction landowners had to State Parks' threat to employ eminent domain to acquire local properties in the mid-1970s (1984, 28). Many of the residents felt that if the state owned more property, there would not be a large enough population base to sustain the town economically. Locals responded by organizing themselves and voluntarily conserving their own land by cooperating with the Humboldt-North Coast Land Trust. Similar to the locals in Trinidad, the Sutter Buttes landowners are often keen to protect their properties from development, which makes studying the effects of positive sense of place and voluntary private conservation pertinent, and deserving of further study.

On a different note, Stedman's article focuses on the ability of the physical environment to influence place meanings and sense of place. He provides validation for the claim that physical environments can have significant impact on people's sense of place, an assertion that contradicts previous assertions claiming that place meanings are completely social in origin. In his words, "Although social constructions are important, they hardly arise out of thin air: The local environment sets bounds and gives form to these constructions" (2003, 671). He exemplifies this by asking, "Are we really likely to attribute 'wilderness' meanings to a suburban shopping mall?" (2003, 673). He asserts that this perspective is not environmental determinism, but rather that the physical environment simply influences sense of place. Using an experiment in northern Wisconsin, Stedman reveals that new development projects often have a significant impact on people's sense of place. This provides an important baseline for my research, proving that although place meaning can be interpreted differently, the physical makeup of the Buttes sets limitations on how one can interpret that landscape. Since the physical environment influences place meanings, and place meanings have a profound effect on people's behavior, it is likely that the Buttes' physical environment affects the decision making, i.e., behavior, of its landowners. These decisions may include land-use choices, which entail landowners' decisions to retain their properties. It is then highly salient to study the

correlation between physical environments and sense of place, and how these factors influence land-use decisions.

There is also a significant and well-established literature base focusing on why people resist landscape development, much of which highlights place attachment and sense of place as primary motives (Slattery 2002; Stedman 2003; Walker and Ryan 2008; Devine-Wright 2009; Collins and Kearns 2012; Collins and Kearns 2013). Collins and Kearns argue place attachment motivated resistance to coastal development in the community of Ngunguru, New Zealand, between 2008 and 2009 (2012). The owners of a sandspit proposed the development of 350 houses, which would have been widely visible to the rest of the community. Much of the community had strong feelings of anxiety and outrage over the developers' motivations, and a sense of urgency to stop the development. This, according to Collins and Kearns, was the result of respondents' strong sense of place "disruption," a feeling of anxious detachment from a sense of place. This argument reinforces the importance of attachment to natural places and the ability for "place attachment" to affect actions and decision-making—yet again strengthening the case that major land-use decisions can be emotional in origin, including that of the Sutter Buttes landowners.

Background: Conservation and Current Land Use

Until the past quarter-century, ownership of the Sutter Buttes was relatively homogeneous and comprised mostly of ranches (Sutter Buttes Regional Land Trust no date; Hausback et al. 2011). The first attempts to install a park in the Buttes came about in the late 1920s, both from within the community and from state officials, but for unknown reasons, neither of these proposals came to fruition (Cunningham 1928; Olmstead 1929, 33, 65). Despite private ownership, access was relatively open until the mid-1960s (Krock and Anderson 2006). For the first half of the twentieth century, visitors could freely explore the Buttes as long as they followed a few basic rules and refrained from hunting. However, after a series of abuses, including graffiti on rock faces, leaving gates open, driving off road, and a succession of arson fires, the landowners, backed by PG&G, barred access to anyone but residents and their acquaintances (Nadeau no date; Anderson 2004, 199).

The mid-1970s became a flashpoint between State Parks, landowners, and the surrounding community. In 1973 State Parks commissioned a survey of unprotected places in California that might benefit from State protection (Kunit et al. 1973). The study ranked potential sites based on how well they fit certain criteria: the Sutter Buttes ranked number one in the Central Valley.

These criteria included ecological value, developmental threats, and proximity to population centers, but did not take into account current owners' stances on park establishment. This preliminary survey was intended to inform Park officials as to what lands might be considered for acquisition should the 1974 Park Bond Act pass (California Department of Parks and Recreation 1974). The Act would release \$250 million of park bonds, \$90 million of which was designated for acquisition purposes (Norred et al. 1974). The State included the Buttes in the final plan, which proposed a 7,500-acre park that would consist of a "recent volcanic plug, blue oak woodland, valley grassland, [and] scenic geologic forms" (Kunit et al. 1973, 58).

The plans to acquire a park in the Buttes met with controversy when it reached Sutter County residents shortly after the Park Bond Act passed by sixty percent approval in the June primary of that year (McCreery 2010, 163). Fearing eminent domain, several landowners formed the Buttes Landowners Association and persuaded the Sutter County Supervisors to pass a vote opposing the park (*Appeal-Democrat* 1974a; *Sacramento Bee* 1974; Norred et al. 1974). Conversely, a few members from the surrounding community formed Save the Sutter Buttes, a small pro-park organization (Anderson 2004, 199; Krock and Anderson 2006). This resulted in a political battle between the Landowners Association and Save the Sutter Buttes, with both sides petitioning and allying themselves with prominent political figures, county officials, and nonprofit organizations (*Daily Independent-Herald* 1974a, 1974b; Davis 1974). By September, Parks Director, William Penn Mott Jr. announced that there were more projects than funds, and that there would not be enough money left from the grant to purchase land in the Buttes. He also mentioned that "where there is serious conflict, we obviously will consider other areas that are not in contention" (*Appeal-Democrat* 1974b). Walt Anderson, a Buttes aficionado, also attributed this decision to the controversy, asserting, "A chain of interactions between increasingly polarized sides led to the state shelving its park plans" (Anderson 2004, 199).

In 1976 landowner Peter Steidlmayer thought that by allowing visitors to tour his property he could reduce public demand for access, as well as reduce impetus for State Parks to acquire his land by force (Anderson 2004, 199; Krock and Anderson 2006). Steidlmayer took action by hiring Walt and Rebecca Anderson as directors of his new interpretive program: the West Butte Sanctuary Company. The Andersons worked with Steidlmayer until 1979, when they left due to differing management philosophies. After leaving, the Andersons reached out to more than thirty landowners and began a new interpretive/hiking organization called the Sutter Buttes Naturalists.

This coalition formed the framework for the interpretive programs in the Sutter Buttes that exist today.

The tone of the organization shifted when Ira Heinrich obtained nonprofit status in 1989 and renamed the organization Middle Mountain Foundation (Anderson 2004, 200). Heinrich, who had become director of Sutter Buttes Naturalists in 1985, considered environmental education paramount and took the organization in a decidedly more conservation-oriented direction. They began to take action on management and political issues for the first time, and fought a proposal that would have placed a dump and quarry within Buttes. The organization took another step toward becoming a conservancy in 1996 when they accepted from McClatchy Newspapers, Inc. the donation of 200 acres of land that contained the summit of North Butte (Sutter Buttes Regional Land Trust no date). By the late 1990s, the membership of the organization had grown so large that it necessitated the creation of a board committee (Hubbatt 2013).

The Middle Mountain Foundation's conservation focus expanded in the 2000s. In 2006 the foundation merged with the Yuba-Sutter Land Trust and gained two conservation easements outside the Buttes (Hubbatt 2013). In the fall of 2013, the organization split; the conservancy became the Sutter Buttes Regional Land Trust (SBRLT), and the interpretive/hiking branch became Middle Mountain Interpretive Hikes. According to SBRLT, "the perception that Middle Mountain Foundation has been an organization that allows public access into the private range lands of the Sutter Buttes is accurate, but incomplete" (Hubbatt 2013). The two remain sister organizations and coordinate with each other. It should be noted, however, that despite its name, Sutter Buttes Regional Land Trust has no conservation easements within the Buttes themselves as yet; they do, however, own the titles to two very small properties within the range.

The most dramatic change in ownership occurred when State Parks purchased a 1,785-acre property in Peace Valley, in the northern portion of the Buttes (Stienstra 2004). As before, the State received funds from a ballot—in this case from Prop. 40, which passed in March 2002 and authorized \$226 million for park acquisition (Melley 2003).

As before, the concept of a park within the Buttes ignited controversy. One Buttes property owner said that it seemed like a "prelude to an attack on the middle or bigger chunks of the Buttes" (Melley 2003). Landowners feared that the park would become a "headache," as it could invite trespassing

and vandalism, and interrupt agricultural processes (Enkoji 2005). These concerns were widespread, despite the State's reassurance to landowners that the park's purpose would be for preservation rather than recreation, hikes would be guided, and there would be no campsites (Knapp 2007). Despite State Parks' promise, the surrounding property owners did not grant permission for the general public to use their private road for park access, making the property inaccessible. Roy Stearns, spokesperson for State Parks, claimed, "Until we have access to a county road with some property, we really don't have [public] access" (Rogers 2013). Due to budget deficiencies and legal controversy, the park remains unopened, and as of 2012 an estimated \$874,000 had been spent on upkeep of the inaccessible park (Stacy 2010).

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews are the sole research method in this study. Interviews with landowners provide the most direct and clearest answer to the reasons why they have not sold their properties. These interviews were semi-structured, and thus included several prepared questions; however, respondents were free to deviate and converse as they pleased.

There were a total of three interviews with four landowners, including one interview with two interviewees. I selected interviewees by getting referrals from other landowners and from a widely circulated newspaper article that featured one of the landowners' contact information. These interviewees represent landowners on the east, west, and north sides of the Buttes. All of the interviewees hold properties adjacent to the state park or the private access road leading into the park. Three of the landowners admitted to being approached by State Parks inquiring about purchasing their property. The one landowner who claimed not to have been approached by the state was in the process of personally conserving her property with a conservation easement. Her thoughts were included in this study because they contribute to a greater understanding of how Buttes landowners feel about their properties in general. Three of the four landowners grew up interacting with their future properties and also have ancestral ties to it. Conversely, one of the interviewees had purchased his land from a friend twenty-five years prior to the interview. Furthermore, three of the four landowners had, or at one point had, homes directly on their Buttes properties, while one had her property outside the Buttes but had interacted with the mountains closely since childhood. Two landowners had properties that contained both agricultural land and grazing land, while one owner solely had grazing land, and another solely had agricultural property. For the sake of confidentiality,

none of the interviewees' names are disclosed, rather they are simply referred to hereafter as Participant A, Participant B, Participant C, and Participant D.

Analysis

All interviewees expressed positive emotional ties to the Buttes, but some expressed stronger degrees of attachment than others. Participants B and C verbally expressed affection toward the Buttes that paralleled modern conservation values, whereas Participant A's previous involvement was as a member of SBRLT's Board of Directors, and her desire to establish a conservation easement on her property spoke of her conservation interest for her. Participants C and D were interviewed simultaneously. Participant D seemed to have an overall positive sense of place regarding the Buttes; however, he was considerably more understated than Participant C. This may be interpreted as either a more subtly expressed sense of place, or a comparatively lower sense of place. Furthermore, each individual emphasized different aspects of the Buttes that he or she felt attached to.

For organizational purposes, I borrow John Eyles' categories of sense of place (1985). Examples of these categories include "social," "nostalgic," "commodity," "roots," "way of life," "platform/stage," and "environmental" senses of place. In his study, Eyles sent a questionnaire to 162 individuals of Towcester, England, to measure residents' general impressions of the town. He then generalized each response into a single type, or category, of sense of place, including the several mentioned previously. However, unlike Eyles, I do not label individuals with one "type" of sense of place. Rather, I use three of Eyles' categories simply as a baseboard to describe aspects of this "complex emotional state" (Hays 1988, 54). Each individual may express multiple aspects of sense of place. For example, one might experience a deep "rootedness" in a place that may be partly informed by "environmental" appreciation and "social" ties. Therefore, in this research, Eyles' categories are only a loose organizational framework, as I divided the responses into three of Eyles' categories: "social," "environmental," and "platform/stage" senses of place. I use the social sense of place to refer to how individuals see a place as an epicenter for social ties between family and friends. The platform sense of place—or, as Eyles calls it, the "platform/stage" sense of place—refers to a sense of place that is informed by past experiences and activities; in other words, the events that have happened or will continue to happen at a specific place. My other category is "environmental" sense of place, which refers to the attachment that comes from meaning attributed to the physical features of a place. This may include natural, non-human made physical features, or human-made features on the landscape that physically exist.

Environmental

The physical features of a place, i.e., the environment, can have a significant impact on people's sense of place. For example, Stedman states, "Physical features do not produce sense of place directly, but influence the symbolic meanings of the landscape" (Stedman 2003, 674). These meanings are socially constructed; however, "social constructions [...] hardly arise of thin air: The local environment set bounds and gives form to these constructions" (Stedman 2003, 671). In other words, because the Buttes have a physically distinct character from the adjacent Sacramento Valley, they also garner a different set of meanings that can potentially be applied to them. After applying meaning to physiographic features, "Humans then become attached to the meaning that they have constructed for the landscape." This attachment can be a major part of their sense of place (2003, 674). Based on some of the landowners' sentiments, physical features of the Buttes were often imbued with meaning and featured prominently in how they verbally expressed their sense of place.

Distinctiveness

Scholars often highlight distinctiveness, specifically physical distinctiveness, as an element that can produce a strong sense of place. According to Peterson, "Factors which help define the character or personality of a place [...] may include such elements as distinctive physiographic features" (1982, 2). Furthermore, Hay asserts, "If the place has distinctive features and natural topographical boundaries in a regional sense, then it may be liked more and be more recognizable of a place" (1990, 389).

Two interviewees explicitly addressed the distinctiveness of the Buttes, especially Participant D, who emphasized the Buttes' distinctiveness more positively than any other feature, referring to it three times. When asked if he would sell his land, he replied, "This is a very unique area. I mean there's no other place like this in California, for sure, and there's probably not many like it in the country... that are preserved to this point." Emphasizing distinctiveness after being asked this question implies that the Buttes' unique character is a primary reason for holding on to his property. Separately, Participant D expressed appreciation for the mountains' unique human landscape as well, stating that they have a "very unique history" and shared with me his extensive knowledge of the history of his and his neighbors' properties. This suggests that the human draw to the distinctive features of a place may extend beyond the physical landscape and may center on immaterial features. Furthermore, Participant D revealed that his awareness

of the Buttes' distinctiveness was a function of his intimacy with the land, stating, "When you really get to know this area, it's just so unique."

Participant A expressed a similar sentiment, explaining, "It's just part of your growing up—you don't realize they're special and how significant they are [until growing older]." She implies that a growing awareness of the Buttes' distinctiveness was a critical component for her creating a positive sense of place.

Aesthetics

A couple of the interviewees emphasized the Buttes' natural beauty as a main factor contributing to their attachment to the mountains. Participant C most clearly emphasized an aesthetic attraction to the Buttes. At the beginning of the interview, Participant C mentioned that the Buttes' scenery was "really incredible. And the view from up on the tower is spectacular." The tower he refers to is an elevated point on his property from which many of the surrounding peaks and valleys become visible. He mentioned several times that this hill was "very powerful and meaningful." After I concluded the interview, he took me up to the aforementioned hill and shared the vista with me.

Participant C's visual attachment to the Buttes was so strong that he stated he had no wish to plant more orchards in the flat areas of his property "because it would destroy the view." Revealing his aesthetic attraction to the mountains even more was a discussion he'd had with Participant D. Participant D originally grew almonds in the valley behind his house, but later switched to wine grapes, which are generally lower to the ground and less dense, thereby increasing his viewshed of the mountains. Participant C implied a certain level of envy toward Participant D's new backyard vista, stating "it's an incredible sight [referring to D's view of the mountains], and we don't have that sight on our ranch."

Similarly, Participant A was also attached to the aesthetics of the physical landscape; however, she did not go to lengths to verbally express it. However, I could ascertain that she appreciated the Buttes' aesthetics based on the fact that the walls of her home were lined with paintings of the mountains themselves.

Despite the fact that Participant D had earlier emphasized the Buttes' distinctiveness, he did not necessarily indicate he felt a strong aesthetic attraction to them, although it is possible that he may have. His more subtle, or perhaps slightly ambivalent, feelings regarding the Buttes' aesthetics are

encapsulated in a story he shared with us. He explained that he'd told his wife, "Maybe I'll get some of this vineyard out, because it's a lot of work. I'll put some more almonds in. And she [his wife] says, 'no way... not happening.'" He acknowledges that his wife feels an aesthetic appreciation for the Buttes; however, he does not express these feelings himself as strongly while recounting the story. In fact, it would not be inconceivable that he is less visually attracted to the Buttes than his wife, based on his willingness to convert his vineyard back into an orchard, which would obstruct his view of the mountains.

Development, or potential development, that might alter the mountains' appearance further exposed the interviewees' level of attachment to the Buttes' aesthetics. For example, Participant A negatively discussed the power lines that ran through the mountains, stating, "They're an eyesore. Here are the Buttes, just sorta a wild place, and they have these big towers marching through." These power lines conflicted with her symbolic meaning of the Sutter Buttes as a "wild place" and thus disrupted her sense of place. When discussing the communication towers on the summit of South Butte, she said, "I'm kinda used to that, but it's kinda nice to see pictures without them," meaning that because they had existed for many years she had become acclimatized to them, and thus they did not disrupt her positive sense of place as much. However, she did indicate they were something to be gotten "used to," and that she enjoyed visuals of the Buttes without them.

Similar to Participant A's distaste for the power lines transecting the Buttes, Participants C and D felt negatively about a proposal to install a separate set of power lines in and around their properties. Participant D told me, "It did not happen; I was on that. Man! I had everybody going on that one soon as I found out."

Similarly, when I asked Participant C how he felt about the proposal, he threw his hands up and exclaimed, "Ugh!" implying absolute disgust at the idea of having a set of power lines disrupting his view. Unlike Participant C, Participant D may have been less concerned with the aesthetics than with his property rights and proper legal etiquette, stating that "they [the electrical companies] didn't have any of the appropriate meetings in the area; they held them out of the area, and that just floored me. I was just so mad about that, and there's a whole protocol."

Furthermore, when asked about 1990's Measure A, which, if approved, would have allowed for the construction of 625 houses in the southeastern portion of the Buttes, Participant C acknowledged the importance of property rights,

then added, "Personally, I wouldn't want to see houses on the hillsides of the Buttes, because then you've got another ridgeline of lights."

Unlike Participant C, Participant B did not appear to be as strongly attached to the Buttes' visuals. When asked how he felt about the communication towers atop South Butte, Participant B replied, "They might be aesthetically ugly," but they were not "environmentally creating a problem." This suggests that Participant B's sense of environmental health is more focused on the habitat, and less with aesthetics. Reinforcing this, he stated, "I don't care one way or another; I'm sure they [the landowners surrounding the towers] are making some good money off the proceeds from the lease on that ground." He added that his main concern with development was the construction of new houses off Pass Road, "near the center of the habitat." It may be that Participant B's concern for habitat stems from his interest in quality hunting, and thus is linked to activities and his platform sense of place.

Platform

Hobbies and Activities

Activities are a way for locals to generate a positive sense of place. They intensify bonds with a place by establishing a routine connection with that landscape. Hay illustrates this, stating, "Human contacts are renewed through family, community, leisure and work involvements" (Hay 1990, 43).

For example, Participant A revealed that the Buttes serve as a venue for interaction with animals, stating, "One of my loves being up there is being on the horse. And taking care of the cows, and riding the hills. And in the spring when they have to calve, well I'm out on the horse going up and down the hills, looking for any cows having trouble having a new calf. So that's the best time to me."

Similarly, Participant C mentioned that the hill, referred to earlier, was a place where he liked to hold "parties up there just to enjoy the moonrise and the sunset."

Related but slightly different, Participant B was enthusiastic because having property in the Buttes would allow him to foster unique hobbies during his retirement in the future. In his words: "What a great place to retire, here. I got all these awesome preservation projects that I can be doing. [...] I think one of my big ones I would love is to start [is the] bolstering of the blacktail deer here, and it really doesn't take that much money; it just takes time." This activity is slightly different from the other participants because it is

anticipative rather than ongoing, and will fulfill a different human need: staying busy during retirement (Hooker and Ventis 1984).

Activities in general may be the dominant factor crafting Participant B's positive sense of place. When discussing the possibility of selling the property, he stated that he and his family had "no intention [...] to sell unless we were in financial burden, would we ever consider selling this because it's such a heritage: the bass fishing, the deer hunting, the quail hunting, the dove hunting... just the relationships we've got from the hiking tours, great friends just from all the hiking here." Amidst the numerous activities mentioned, he specifically emphasizes hunting and fishing. This passion for hunting may explain his significant interest in wildlife conservation in the Buttes, such as his plans to promote the blacktail deer population, mentioned earlier.

Past Experiences and Nostalgia

Two of the landowners emphasized nostalgia and past experiences as part of their relationship with the Buttes. Robert Hay claims that experiences throughout the lifetime of an individual are one of the most significant components for establishing sense of place: "It is the emotional experience of intimate places, that of our homes (and workplaces), which solidifies the realms of space and place, developing sense of place over the years if movement lies mostly within one region" (1990, 26). This is especially applicable in this case study because the interviewees have all worked in and around the Buttes at some point in their life, and three of the four individuals live or have lived on the mountain's flanks.

Participant C made it clear that his experiences were a main component of his attachment. When discussing his land, he said that "you have to live here to know what it's like." This implies that in order to appreciate the land to its fullest, one must spend significant time with it. He later stated that his intimacy with the land was what made being a property owner "worth it." Statements such as this suggest that non-absentee property owners may experience increased levels of attachment and sense of place, due to their wealth of experiences within a single region, a subject that requires further investigation. The experiences that Participant C recounted usually pivoted around the Buttes' aesthetic and physical characteristics: "The experiences that you have out here. You're away from the city. You're away from the noises. The hillsides almost block the light from Yuba City, and Oroville, and Gridley. Just on a clear night looking straight up, the stars are so bright. Watching the moon is just incredible, watching the sunsets. It's an experience that we are so fortunate to have."

Participant B also emphasized experiences. He explicitly stated, "The spectrum of experience in the Buttes is probably what gave me the appreciation for it." The experiences he refers to include the labor he invested in his property and the social experiences he had while recreating in the mountains. For example, Participant B explicitly made the connection between experiences and attachment, stating, "My connection is right down to the dirt, right down to the earth. I've had all the experiences up here that anyone could ever have... Getting cow poop in your mouth from cows kicking it up, and rolling in the mud. And when the corrals are empty after the cattle are in there, we got a little ATV and a rope and slid around in the cow poop having fun, skiing around in the—uh [catches himself]. Building fences up here: it's not where you wanna put the post, it's where it'll allow you to put post." His mention of building fences exemplifies Hay's assertion that investing labor reinforces connections with place, while his recreational and familial experiences give the Buttes personal meaning (Hay 1998).

Social

According to Eyles, a "social sense of place is dominated by the importance attached to social ties and interaction" associated with that place (1985). When positive social ties are made, it can change the meaning of the landscape, such that it is associated with friends, family, and community. Studies on neighborhoods and neighbors' sense of place reveal that sharing places with others and interacting with the community at large is often a determinant of positive sense of place. For example, Mesch and Manor reveal, "The higher the number of close friends and neighbors that are known to live nearby, the higher the attachment to the neighborhood" (1998, 504). There is little reason to believe that this principle should not apply to rural property owners as well. In the Sutter Buttes, landowners often engage with a large community, in the form of guided hikes.

Family

The landowners often discussed the importance of their immediate and extended families living on the properties. However, it is surprising that the landowners did not emphasize their families' deep histories with their properties as a major factor influencing their attachment, despite the fact that three out of the four interviewees had roots to their properties that extended several generations.

Participant D, a first-generation property owner, subtly implied that he valued keeping the property within his family. He did this when he asked his daughter, who happened to be present at the time of the interview, "would

you guys sell?” His daughter replied that neither she nor her sister would sell the property, to which Participant D responded, “You see, there’s another generation that’s not gonna sell it.” Judging by his cadence and intonation, it seemed he was pleased with his daughter’s choice to retain the property, although this cannot be claimed with certainty.

Conversely, Participant B explicitly expressed positive feelings in support of keeping the property within the family. Participant B stated, “There’s never a discussion with my brothers, or I, or my family to ever sell. And my niece and nephew, my son and daughter, and my two other nephews from my other brother, they’re pretty young, they don’t understand, but they’re all on board. They come up here often. We fish, we picnic. This is one of our Easter picnic spots, right here.” Stating “they’re on board” implies that the holding on the property is a shared family value. He follows this by listing the activities and traditions that the next generation is already involved in. It is possible that these traditions are an attempt to instill or foster a positive connection between the children and the Buttes’ landscape, and thus be more likely for them to retain the property in the future. It is also possible that Participant B uses activities and events as a tactic to instill the youngest generation with a passion for the mountains, because it is how he became attached to the Buttes himself.

Participant B brought up the property’s family value again, stating, “My mom intended to give one of the boys this ranch, one of the boys Colusa Ranch, and one of the boys Grimes [ranch], and instead when she handed it over to us we got back into family mode... We’re gonna try and keep ‘em all together if we can.” For Participant B and his family, the Buttes property is too meaningful for it to be inherited by one family member.

Sharing and Community Interaction

Two of the interviewees frequently guide hikes onto their properties, often for Middle Mountain Interpretive Hikes. Both of these landowners emphasized guiding hikes as paramount to their attachment to their properties, but emphasized different aspects they enjoyed about the task.

Participant C emphasized teaching others and sharing his perspectives on the Buttes. When asked whether he would ever consider selling his property, Participant C said, “Well, I personally wouldn’t sell. There isn’t enough money [in existence] to buy the ranch. I guess my passion for the land is so great...that I mean...how fortunate we are to have it...and I love sharing it. When I lead hikes, I share stories, I want the people to have a feeling that they understand the land and that they understand my family’s passion for

the land.” Positive sense of place—or, as Participant C calls it, “passion for the land”—is why he has not sold his property, and guiding hikes serves to more deeply entrench his attachment to the land.

Participant B, on the other hand, emphasized the emotional rewards of guiding hikes. For example, he explained that he valued guiding “the STARS program out of Marysville. It’s underprivileged kids, and a lot of Air Force families from Beale Air Force Base. Their families are coming and going, and they don’t have a lot of time for their kids, so we take ‘em out on field trips. And it’s very rewarding, because they probably haven’t been into their own backyard, let alone into the wilderness, and this isn’t like the Sierra Nevada but at least its outdoors. And they’re like, ‘we’re gonna climb to the top of that!’ and the reward is very great.” In this example, Participant B experiences an emotional reward from contributing to the local community. Participant B’s negative comparison of the Buttes to the Sierra Nevada also provides more evidence to suggest that Participant B is not as strongly attached to the Buttes’ aesthetics as he is to its other aspects.

To further emphasize Participant B’s passion for guiding hikes, he also stated that the reason he would not sell his property is because of “the relationships we’ve got from the hiking tours.” He brought this theme up later, stating, “I’ve met a lot great people on these [hikes]...very intelligent...educated me!” Lastly, he expressed that guiding hikes was one of his most favored hobbies, stating, “That’s what I wanna do; I’d rather do this than farm. I mean, can you blame me?”

Conclusion

Three of interviewees had aesthetic, platform, or social senses of place. Participant D had either a more subtly expressed or less intense sense of place than the rest of the interviewees. It should still be acknowledged that Participant D had a positive appreciation for the Buttes’ physical and historical uniqueness. However, his more restrained enthusiasm might be explained by Hay’s hypothesis, that residents raised in an area feel a greater sense of place than do immigrants (Hay 1998, 25). In this case, unlike the other landowners, Participant D was relatively new, having had ownership for only twenty-five years.

This research reveals that landowners can feel strong ties to their properties—i.e., a place—that may exceed their desire for economic betterment. However, it should be stated that economics are important, as they can limit inhabitants’ ability to own/live in a place. For example, if the individuals

I interviewed had been suffering financially, they might have been more willing to compromise their properties. As Participant B stated, “Unless we were in financial burden would we ever consider selling this,” suggesting that his attachment to the property could be trumped during financial straits.

A positive sense of place, or attachment to the land, such that it supersedes potential economic betterment, stands in contrast to what Simon Williams calls “orthodox” rational choice theory. Rational choice theory argues that “individual self-interest is the fundamental human motive, and... individual actors pursue their goals efficiently,” often basing decisions on careful analysis of the costs and benefits of all possible options (Mayhew 2009). Williams asserts that “orthodox” rational choice has been the “dominant [economic philosophy] throughout the course of Western history” and that this iteration of the theory is “one in which a wedge is firmly driven between reason, on the one hand, and emotion, on the other” (2000, 58). Furthermore, when emotions are acknowledged, they are “banished to the ‘irrational’ margins of Western thought and practice” (2000, 58). In addition, Archer reveals that the theory relies on the assumption that most individuals are rational agents who use the means-ends calculus of the so-called “economic man” (2010, 36). This economic man is “a completely rational actor who enters into transactions solely to maximize his economic well-being. He is unconstrained by noneconomic impulses and desires” (Fineman and Dougherty 2005, xiii). Research on property owners in the Sutter Buttes contradicts these assumptions, and proves that, in many cases, economics are not the only factor driving major decision-making, thus calling “orthodox” rational choice theory’s predictive currency into question. As Matthews and Herbert state, “In reality, people often behave in suboptimal ways, with much less than full information and perhaps influenced by emotional value” (2008, 57).

The Sutter Buttes represent a case study in which positive sense of place has had a major role in the legal administration of publicly desirable property. It does not prove that sense of place is the only reason why landowners choose to keep the titles to their lands, and indeed there may be, and likely are, other factors as well. However, it does indicate that positive sense of place is a major factor in their decision-making and should be considered in the future by organizations who may be seeking to acquire property from private hands. Furthermore, the behavior of many of the landowners was often aligned with modern conservation values. Participant A was in the process of placing a conservation easement on her property, Participant B strongly emphasized native wildlife promotion, and Participant C emphasized a strong distaste for development in the mountains, while also acknowledging the importance

property rights. This suggests that it may be possible to harness a positive sense of place to inspire private conservation, and thus brings forth the need for further research on this topic.

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