

The Impact of Natural Landscapes on Inspiration: A Topophilic Study

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This paper presents findings from an exploratory, qualitative study on the impact of various natural landscapes on inspiration. The study was conducted in the summers of 2015 and 2017 and explored the relationship between landscape and inspiration through the theoretical framework of topophilia—the affinity people have for certain places or landscape features (Tuan, 1974). All participants were students on an extended traveling college field course called American Ecosystems (AE). Students studied the flora, fauna, ecology, weather, climate, geology, landforms, and environmental issues associated with each place visited. Locations included many western national parks and monuments. Each student taught about one place.

Topophilia is the affective or emotional bond between people and place or setting. It involves an affinity for locations and landscapes (Tuan, 1974). Studies have identified many factors that influence perception of landscape including culture/cultural history, age, gender, background, and familiarity (Gibson, 2009; Tuan, 1974). The impact of landscapes on people has been studied in various contexts including wilderness experiences (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1995) and field courses (Boyle et al., 2007; Elkins & Elkins, 2007; Hope, 2009). Proposed explanations for the human response to landscapes include the *savanna hypothesis* (Falk & Balling, 2010) and *biophilia* (Wilson, 1984). Topophilia-related research has looked at the influence of landscape on environmental perception, attitudes, and values (Tuan, 1974); environmental sensitivity (Metzger & Mcewen, 1999); quality of life (Ogunseitan, 2005); connectedness to nature (Mayer & Frantz, 2004); environmentally responsible behavior (Vaske & Kobrin, 2001); and sustainability (Beery, Ingemar Jonsson, & Elmberg, 2015).

Research on human–nature attachment has often focused more on individual to place than “the affective appeal that place impresses upon the individual” (Frederickson & Anderson, 1999, p. 22). Despite anecdotal evidence, little research has looked at the ability of landscapes to inspire. Thus, more research is needed on the impact of the setting or place on the human experience. A topophilic connection can be intellectual, spiritual, or emotional, and the connection is often related to characteristics of the place (Tuan, 1974). This study explored the attraction between participants and places/landscape features, as well as if and how that affinity created a sense of inspiration, defined as “the process of being mentally stimulated to do or feel something”

(“Inspiration,” 2017). The results presented in this paper represent an analysis of the end-of-course responses in terms of demographics: gender, academic majors, previous visitation, and amount of time spent at each place.

Method

Participants were chosen based on criterion sampling (Creswell, 2014). All participants were students on either the 2015 ($n = 15$) or 2017 ($n = 15$) AE traveling field course offered by Montreat College. The 2015 course studied the ecosystems of 19 U.S. national parks, monuments, and natural areas over 26 days. The 2017 course did the same at 14 similar locations over 18 days. Students traveled on a sleeper bus, which allowed the group to visit many parks in the American West in a relatively short amount of time. Participation in the study was completely voluntary and not connected to student grades. Participants majored in environmental studies, biology, outdoor education, English/creative writing, communication, and psychology.

On each trip, data collection took place in two phases. First, a short survey consisting of open-ended questions was administered immediately after each park visit to determine if students were inspired by the place and, if so, to determine what features or qualities inspired them. Based on their responses, they were asked why they thought each place was or was not inspirational. In addition to questions about inspiration and landscape, information was collected on the weather, their emotional state, and group dynamics on the day they visited to help determine if these factors affected the participants’ experience of place. They were also asked if they had visited the park previously. Short follow-up interviews while on the course were conducted as necessary to clarify responses. All responses were self-reported.

The second phase of data collection took place at the end of the course. Participants (1) ranked their top five most inspirational places (parks, monuments, natural areas) and described why they found them to be inspirational, (2) rank ordered their three least inspirational places and described why they did not find them to be inspirational, and (3) described what landscape features or characteristics most inspired them. Because many of the parks, monuments, and natural areas contained different types of landscapes, biomes, and ecosystems, participants were provided with a comprehensive list of the most prominent ones. They used this list to describe which ones they found most inspirational.

Data analysis for this qualitative study employed a grounded theory approach, whereby theory emerged from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The words and phrases in the survey responses were analyzed for content and used in the construction of themes. The two trip leaders/course instructors for the 2015 trip were also researchers for the study. One of the two trip leaders/course instructors for the 2017 trip was also a researcher. While this was helpful for ensuring consistency in data collection and interpretation, it also represented a potential source of bias. To increase trustworthiness of the findings, a third researcher not on each trip coded 20% of the data with a goal of 80% agreement or higher.

Results and Discussion

The three most inspirational parks were Zion, Grand Teton, and Badlands (2015) and Grand Teton, Yellowstone, and Yosemite (2017). Factors most often linked to inspiration included (1) vertical landscape features, (2) positive group dynamics and shared experiences, and (3) direct experience of place through various activities (e.g., hiking, horseback riding). These factors are supported by previous findings (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999). Five of these parks also represented places where students spent more time on the trip.

Results were interpreted according to landscape features, qualities of the landscape, and reactions to the landscape. Although many individual landscape features inspired participants, the most frequently cited were vertical expanses (canyons, faulted mountains, and volcanic mountains). The most frequently cited landscape quality was “beauty,” and the most frequently

cited reaction was “awe” or “a sense of wonder.” If inspiration is defined as “the process of being mentally stimulated to do or feel something,” it could be said students were mentally stimulated by the “beauty” of “vertical spaces” to feel “a sense of awe.” In addition, students often cited experiencing nature (hiking, tidepooling), overcoming personal challenges related to the landscapes (steep trails), and encountering wildlife as important sources of inspiration. Horizontal landscape features such as open grasslands and plains received both positive (sublime) and negative (overwhelming) reactions. This study adds to the literature on how humans experience natural landscapes and how those experiences inspire them emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually.

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