

The Power of Connection: Sustainable Lifestyles and Sense of Place

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Abstract

“Sense of place” refers to a psychological construct that involves attributing a geographical location with meaning, values, and a sense of “connection.” Previous research has shown that having a sense of place, particularly in relation to natural environments, can motivate people to engage in actions for sustainability but that such a sense of place is less likely to occur in urban environments. This study focuses on what motivates people living in the city of Melbourne to live an environmentally sustainable lifestyle, specifically investigating the role of “sense of place.” Nineteen in-depth interviews were conducted with residents engaged in three types of sustainability activism: personal (e.g., energy and water saving, shopping at farmers’ markets); group (e.g., community gardens, sharing neighborhood goods); and political (e.g., lobbying and organizing for structural change). Although participants did report experiencing a “sense of place” in Melbourne, it was their broader feelings of connection with nature and the planet as a whole; their awareness of the human-made and cultural/political environment; and their personal health, relationships, and community, not necessarily connected to a geographical location within Melbourne, which they reported motivate them to take action. Slight differences in motivating factors were found between the different types of activist, although connection with nature was consistent across all groups. It appears that in urban settings, local sense of place could act as an “enabler” and “reinforcer” of action, providing a location

in which to act, and people to act with, rather than as a motivating factor per se. It also provides psychological and social benefits.

Introduction

I sense that human beings live best when they remember that they live inside a natural order, that the land includes us and all our schemes and creations, and that when we begin to imagine our lines of kinship and our bonds of responsibility extending out, beyond ourselves and our human families and our nations to the many forms of life and intelligence that comprise our home place, then it is that we will learn how to behave well, not only at home, not only in human society, but as inhabitants of the earth. (Tredinnick, 2003, p. 27)

We are currently living in a time of ecological crisis, and as Deborah Rose Bird expresses, “catastrophe surrounds us but has not yet hit us fully” (1996, p. 213). Humans around the world are continuing to show a heightened understanding of the major environmental crisis we have on our hands (Fransson & Garling, 1999; Halpenny, 2010; Schahn & Holzer, 1990; Schultz, 2000; Schultz & Zelezny, 1998). Most people, however, fail to minimize their environmental impact and make choices that help protect and conserve our natural environment (Halpenny, 2010). Therefore, it is important to investigate what it is that makes people more environmentally conscious and motivates them to live a more sustainable lifestyle. One of the ways it has been suggested for people to become motivated to live sustainably is through developing a relationship to their “place” (Lewicka, 2010, p. 209).

Place, sense of place, and place attachment

Elizabeth Halpenny describes “place” as “a spatial location that is assigned meanings and values by society and individuals” (2010, p. 409), while Maria Lewicka describes place as being a “meaningful location” (2010, p. 209). David Orr’s earlier work describes how place

is “defined by its human scale: a household, neighborhood, community, forty acres, one thousand acres” (1992, p. 126). The term “sense of place” is more of a psychological construct referring to the meanings, feelings, and sense of relationship that people attribute to a particular place (Cross, 2001; Kyle & Chick, 2007). “Place attachment” specifically refers to people’s bond or connection to a place (Halpenny, 2010; Raymond et al., 2010), including a sense of belonging, and forms one aspect of “sense of place” (Harper et al., 2012). For the purposes of our paper and research, however, we define a “sense of place” as “having a place that has meaning and value to you, a place where you feel attached to both the physical and social environment.” We postulate that this sense of place comprises a relationship with nature and natural environments, human-made and cultural environments, and individual people and community in a particular geographical location. In this way, our definition of “sense of place” is similar to Raymond and colleagues’ (2010) definition of “place attachment” but separating the civic and natural dimensions (as suggested by Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

De’place’ment

Throughout most of history, humans have lived in wild and rural areas, dependent on gathering and hunting, herding, then agriculture, for our survival. In recent centuries and even decades, however, the world has experienced unprecedented urban growth. According to the Population Reference Bureau, 2008 marked the first time that the human population was split evenly between rural and urban areas. It predicts that by the year 2050, 70% of the world’s population will be urban (Population Reference Bureau, 2012).

In Vaclav Havel’s essay *Politics and Conscience* (1984), he described the experience of an ordinary medieval farmer and how he was rooted in the experience of his place. The farmer was able to create a satisfactory economic and ecological system, where everything was bound together, and people were able to place a meaningful connection to the land, thus generating its stability. Havel goes on to claim that we have replaced this deep rootedness to the land with modern science and technology, because “people thought they could explain and conquer nature—yet the outcome is that they destroyed it and disinherited themselves from it” (Havel, 1984, p. 1). Over time, people have moved further away physically, emotionally, and psychologically from nature, and as a result a major disconnect has occurred. As David Orr writes evocatively, we have become

displaced people for whom our immediate places are no longer sources of food, water, livelihood, energy, materials, friends, recreation, or sacred inspiration...We consume a great deal of

time and energy going somewhere else...Our lives are lived amidst the architectural expressions of displacement: the shopping mall, apartment, neon strip, freeway, glass office tower, and homogenized development—none of which encourage much of rootedness, responsibility, and belonging. (1992, pp. 126–127)

The society that the majority of us inhabit today encourages a strong disconnect from the natural environment as well as the community around us. Having a sense of place therefore becomes a lot harder for people to find. Therefore, as Orr suggests, people are less rooted to where they live and as a result feel less inclined to take any responsibility for the environment around them.

Recent research has confirmed the observation that people living in the cities are more disconnected from nature than those living in rural areas. One of the results of moving into cities is that people no longer experience the natural world directly as a part of everyday life, but instead nature has become an indirect experience (Kellert, 2002; Schultz, 2002). Joe Hinds and Paul Sparks (2008) studied people’s intentions to engage with the natural environment, which they found were positively associated with emotional connection and identification with nature. They also found that participants who grew up in rural environments had significantly higher levels of all these variables than those who had grown up in urban environments (p. 109).

Elizabeth Halpenny (2010) investigated the relationship between place attachment and proenvironmental behavioral intentions. She quotes Vaske and Kobrin’s (2001) speculations that “a positive attachment to a place (particularly a nature-based setting such as a park) may be strongly linked to an individual’s performance of behaviors that benefit the global environment” (Halpenny, 2010, p. 410). Halpenny’s research confirmed that having a positive emotional attachment to an iconic natural place (in this case a Canadian national park) could predict both place-specific and general proenvironmental behavioral intentions for everyday life. Halpenny notes that there have only been a few empirical studies done exploring the link between place attachment and proenvironmental intentions and behaviors. She suggests that more research is necessary, particularly in relation to everyday rather than iconic natural settings and that “these phenomena may be better studied through longitudinal and in-depth case studies of groups and individuals” (p. 418). Based on a rigorous literature review from several fields, she suggests that physical and emotional connection to places, including a sense of belonging to urban neighborhoods, is correlated with place-protective behaviors. Lea Scannell and Robert Gifford conducted research with residents of two Canadian towns and confirmed these findings. They also found it was people’s attachment to the natural places within

their town, rather than their cultural or “civic” connection to their town, which predicted general proenvironmental behaviors (2010).

Recreating a sense of place

If these preliminary findings are indeed correct, then it will be important to find ways to rebuild a sense of place in urban environments through reconnecting to the natural environment and with community. Within their extensive literature review examining place attachment, Christopher Raymond and colleagues (2010) examine the role of community and “social bonding,” the feelings of belonging to a group of people, in forming place attachment. They cite several studies suggesting that social bonding occurring in a place can “transfer” to a sense of connection to the physical environment (e.g., Kyle et al., 2004). They also cite an early study (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974), which found that the social connectedness that developed between people over the course of their living in one particular place was a more powerful predictor of community attachment than population size or the density of a community. In other words, it was not so much a function of the geographical location itself compared with the way individuals connect with “local social networks (bonds) and the interactions that occur with them” (Raymond et al., 2010, p. 423). This bodes well for the development of a “sense of place” in urban environments where it may be possible to build connections between people with common interests, particularly those living close to each other in neighborhoods. Direct connection with nature is also possible in urban environments through seeking out natural areas such as parks and gardens, beaches and rivers, and paying attention to natural features within the cityscape itself such as trees and “nature strips” and the wildlife that inhabits them (Booth, 2008). As deep ecologist Bill Devall writes, “even in the concrete depths of the largest city, a person can explore the bedrock upon which the city is built, and trace the watersheds of the streams and rivers channeled in concrete pipes” (1988, p. 51).

One way that city dwellers might become connected to both nature and community is through participating in an urban community garden. Nicole Comstock and colleagues (2010) studied participants in community gardens across Denver, Colorado, and note how “community and home gardens represent examples of the neighborhood environment that connect people to place and have been identified as important for promoting a range of community and individual benefits.” These benefits include healthy lifestyles involving physical activity and good nutrition, connecting people with their local environment, as well as fostering community engagement and environmental action (p. 435). Comstock and colleagues use the

term “neighborhood attachment” to refer to people’s emotional connection to their physical and social environment.

In summary, there is some evidence that having a positive “sense of place” and “place attachment,” particularly with natural environments, is related to engaging in environmentally responsible behavior. Urban lifestyles are associated with a lower “sense of place” and “place attachment,” which would suggest that urban dwellers would be less likely to engage in environmentally responsible behaviors. Given a lack of evidence that urban dwellers are less environmentally responsible than rural dwellers, the role that sense of place plays in motivating action for sustainability is unclear. Our research project was designed to address this ambiguity and explore the degree and manner in which sense of place drives proenvironmental behaviors in urban settings. Unlike the previous research cited, using psychological scales to measure correlation between variables, we use in-depth interviews and qualitative methodology. We also focus on individuals who are already engaged in proenvironmental behavior rather than a general population with a range of levels of proenvironmental behavior. This design has enabled us to focus more clearly on *how* sense of place may be related to these actual behaviors. Our research was inspired by four key questions, which are addressed in the rest of this paper. How do urban environmentalists *experience* sense of place in their city? If sense of place is generally low in urban environments, then what *is* motivating these city dwellers who are living sustainable lifestyles? *Does* sense of place motivate environmentally responsible behavior in cities? If it does, then how can sense of place be increased in urban environments?

Methodology

In order to further investigate the relationship between “sense of place” and proenvironmental behavior in an urban environment, we conducted a series of in-depth interviews with people living in the city of Melbourne who are actively engaged in a variety of sustainable lifestyles: personal environmentally responsible actions in the home, community-based sustainability group actions, or political activities to change society on a larger scale. We chose to interview these different types of activist in order to represent the range of environmentally responsible behaviors necessary for significant social change toward sustainability and to enable comparison between the experiences and motivations of these groups of people.

Location and research participants

Melbourne is the capital and largest city in the state of Victoria, with the second largest and fastest growing population in Australia

(4.1 million people in 2011). Melbourne is a progressive city, with a thriving urban culture and many sustainability initiatives. Participants in this study were all actively engaged in sustainable lifestyles and belonged to one of three different behavioral groups that are loosely based on Paul Stern's types of "environmentally significant behaviors" (1997, 2000):

- *Personal action* (Stern's "private-sphere environmentalism," e.g., energy and water efficiency in the home, recycling and composting, purchasing less, buying local products, growing one's own food, and shopping at local farmers' markets)
- *Group action* (a redefinition of Stern's "non-activist behaviors in public sphere" to "engaging in community/group-oriented actions toward sustainability," e.g., community gardening, planting trees, swapping or bartering local goods and services, and "share groups" that share tools and knowledge toward sustainability)
- *Political action* (Stern's "environmental activism," e.g., active involvement in environmental activist and conservation organizations; campaigning, lobbying, or working on different initiatives to make society more sustainable on a larger scale)

It is important to note that these three different types of activist are inevitably intertwined; thus many interviewees are engaged in all three types of activism. For the purpose of analysis, however, participants were allocated to the group reflecting the types of sustainability activities to which they dedicated most of their time and efforts. Having said that, note also that "personal action" is undertaken by the participants in the "group action" and "political action" behavioral groups. That is, the majority of participants reported that they "always" engage in sustainability behaviors at home such as buying local and organic food, making a conscious effort to conserve energy and water use, disposing of waste in a sustainable way (e.g., recycling and composting), and trying to take public transport or biking/walking as often as they can.

Participants from each of the behavioral groups were recruited for this study in different ways. Members of the "personal action" behavioral group ($N=6$) were recruited at the Collingwood Children's Farm Farmers' Market. Brief face-to-face surveys were conducted with randomly selected shoppers, asking a few questions pertaining to engaging in sustainability behaviors at home. If individuals fit the criteria for engaging in personal action and living a sustainable lifestyle at home, then they were asked if they would be willing to be interviewed, which was then arranged for another date. Members of the "group action" ($N=7$) and "political action" ($N=6$) behavioral groups were also recruited by finding relevant groups and organi-

zations online, e-mailing representatives, and through a "snowballing" method where interviewees recommended other individuals in their networks who might be interested in being interviewed. This networking process was assisted by Jose Ramos of the Melbourne Social Forum. After initial contact, mostly through e-mail, if potential participants fit the behavioral group criteria, then they were asked for an interview. Participants interviewed from the "group action" category were members of the Sustainable Living Foundation, Murandaka Cohousing Community, The Sustainable Table, South Melbourne Commons, Sharehood, Merri Corner Community Garden, and Rushall Community Garden. Participants interviewed from the "political action" category were members of Eco-Shout, The Wilderness Society, Australian Youth Climate Coalition, Environment Victoria, Beyond Zero Emissions, and Australian Conservation Federation.

Demographic information collected from the total of 19 participants includes an equal gender balance (12 women, 7 men). Ages ranged from 26 to 68, with a median age of 43. Participants were highly educated, with 18 having university degrees and 15 of these being postgraduate degrees. The length of time participants had been living in Melbourne ranged from a couple of months to their whole life (in one case, 65 years). Five participants had lived in Melbourne their whole life. Eighteen participants were of European descent, and six were immigrants to Australia.

Surveys and in-depth interviews

A brief survey to assist in the selection of participants was designed to determine (i) whether people were actively engaged in sustainability behaviors and (ii) which sustainability behavioral group they fit in best (e.g., if they were involved in any community groups working toward sustainability like community gardens or political organizations working toward sustainability). Their level of engagement was assessed by asking them about personal actions they take toward sustainability. Six questions asked potential participants if they "always," "sometimes," or "never" engaged in the following household sustainability actions: buying local and organic food, consciously conserving energy and water use at home, disposing of waste through composting and recycling, use of public transport/bicycle/walking, and "group action" and "political action" as described above. If potential participants answered at least five out of the six questions with an "always," then they were asked if they would be willing to take part in an in-depth interview that would last about an hour.

The in-depth interview contained 23 questions plus associated prompts in six broad categories asked in this order: motivation for sustainability, connection to nature and community, living in an

urban setting, challenges of leading a sustainable lifestyle, sense of place, and plans for the future/expanding the social movement. In each of these categories, questions and prompts were designed to delve deeply into each participant's motivation toward sustainability. The intention was to understand how they were able to connect to the place around them, whether this had any benefits to their physical and psychological health/well-being, as well as any obstacles they faced while pursuing a sustainable lifestyle. Interview questions included: "What motivated you to start changing your behavior to be more sustainable?" "Do you think your connection to nature affects your lifestyle?" and "A sense of place is essentially having a place that has meaning and value to you, a place you feel attached to, both the physical and social environment. Does this definition mean anything to you?" Questions were asked in approximately the same order of categories each time; however, flexibility was allowed, and different prompts were asked to increase the natural flow of the conversation. Using a social change methodology of "strategic questioning" (Peavey, 1992), questions on a lighter note were followed by more personal, thought-provoking questions in the middle; and the interview ended on a positive note, asking how interviewees would suggest expanding the sustainability social movement. This appeared to be helpful for interviewees in rebuilding their optimism after dealing with some emotionally difficult questions. Interviews were conducted by Zoey Rogers during April 2012 in various locations throughout Melbourne suggested by interviewees including people's homes, community gardens, cafes and office spaces, and one Skype phone call. Each interview lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, averaging 50 minutes. Audio recordings were made of each interview, and interviewees provided written consent to use their words for research and publication purposes. The interviews were not fully transcribed but written down in note form while the interview was taking place. These notes were used to identify themes, and the interviewer then went back to listen to and transcribe the recordings in order to quote the participants accurately.

Grounded theory was used as the method of analysis. Key points were extracted from notes written during the interview and marked with a series of codes. As new codes were created, previous interview notes were reviewed to ensure coverage. The codes were then grouped together into similar concepts, the concepts grouped into meaningful categories and then compared between groups in order to identify themes. Saturation was not fully obtained for all themes because there was a time restraint on the number of interviews conducted. Results have therefore been reported in such a way to demonstrate the proportion of the 19 participants making similar responses. The following terms represent a specific range of inter-

viewees: "more than half" means more than 10 people, "most" means 16–18, and "a few" means less than 5. Themes are presented below in sections relating to the central questions of this research project.

Results/Discussion

Our analyses are presented in two parts. The first part explores urban environmentalists' experiences of sense of place in their city. It examines their experiences of connection with community and nature, the perceived benefits of these, how sense of place is built over time, and how it can be encouraged in urban environments. The second part explores participants' understandings of what motivates their environmental activism. It examines their motivations for starting to live a more sustainable lifestyle as well as what sustains their environmental action, the role that "sense of place" plays as a motivator, and how environmental action can be encouraged in others.

Experiencing sense of place in a city

When given the definition of a "sense of place" as "having a place that has meaning and value to you, a place where you feel attached to both the physical and social environment," all participants identified with this experience. The "places" described by people, however, were not only within the city of Melbourne. Eleven people only identified places throughout Melbourne, and seven identified places within Melbourne as well as other places throughout Australia or the world. Only one person had not yet experienced a "sense of place" in Melbourne, and she had only lived there for 6 months. So far, these results suggest that people engaging in sustainable lifestyles in the city also experience a "sense of place" there. In the typology of sense of place developed by Jennifer Cross (2001, p. 9), participants exhibit either a "cohesive rootedness" within Melbourne or a "divided rootedness" with another location. As the following quotations from interviews show, interviewees' feelings of connection to community, connection to nature, and having lived in a place for a long period of time are all factors associated with having a "sense of place" in a particular location. Many participants also believe that it is possible to encourage others to have a sense of place, and it is most likely to come about through community building.

Finding sense of place through community. Participants described being surrounded by friends, family, like-minded people, and a culture you can connect to as important aspects in connecting to a place. One participant, who is in her mid-30s and runs her own sustainable garden design company based on permaculture principles, said, "I guess I've always had a connection to Melbourne...because the people I love the most in my life are here, and I have a

history here.” Another interviewee who is a retired music teacher engaged in “personal action” and moved to Melbourne 2 years ago has been able to easily find a “sense of place” in her home, the street, and the community where she lives. She believes this is because “I chose the house specifically because it suits our lifestyle...that feeling a part of the community, and that you belong there and that people care about you.”

About half the participants said that they have close relationships with their neighbors, while the other half said they do not. Overall, the participants who live in a neighborhood where they experience a “sense of place” tended to report a better relationship with their neighbors. Participants living in apartments or in neighborhoods that they were not as fond of were generally not as close with their neighbors. When asked how involved they were in their community (e.g., attending community events, being involved in community organizations, community gardens, or simply taking various classes such as yoga with people in their community), 14 participants said that they consider themselves to be involved with their community, while four did not. It is also evident that participants who take part in “group action” for sustainability (e.g., community gardening) reported being more involved with their community and also had closer connections with their neighbors.

Other participants emphasized the importance of people who share the same values and interest in sustainability. One person, who engages in personal action toward sustainability specifically by living a vegan lifestyle, said, “I guess associating with more like-minded people helps you gain a sense of place. I think there’s a lot of like-minded people in Melbourne...which makes it a very comfortable place to live.” Another participant, who moved to Melbourne as a child from Argentina, is in his early 30s, and is a general manager of a sustainability organization, described how he likes living in an area where people share the same politics and understand sustainability issues. He also emphasized the importance of staying in a place for a long period of time:

As you live in a place for longer and you do start to build networks and contacts and that kind of stuff, and I’ve obviously got those in Melbourne. You walk down the street and you run into someone you know...It’s very useful from an activist perspective, having the networks and the community where you’re working means you’re more effective.

A woman participant in her 20s and originally from Sweden is engaged in looking at food as a means of exploring sustainability issues. She pointed to the power of individual choice and community structures to create a sense of place.

I think it has got more to do with structures, how we structure our lives, if we choose to engage in community activities, and what sort of social network that we have and how many people that we know. If you feel like you are contributing and you feel like you are valued. I think anywhere you go you can arrive at a feeling of sense of place if you feel like a valued member of a community.

Finding sense of place through nature. Although the majority of participants agreed that they have to escape the city to fully immerse themselves and connect with nature, many participants also believe that it is possible to find nature and connect to nature while living in an urban setting. Melbourne’s parks, botanical gardens, bay, river, and community gardens are described as providing many opportunities. A participant who is a volunteer for an environmental activist organization said, “Melbourne is such an easy place to find some green-scape,” and another participant who focuses mainly on “personal action” said, “I think we’re lucky to have all the parks that we have in the city.” One interviewee who is an active community gardener noted that nature is

just there if you want to notice it...like magpies caroling from the lamp posts or the insects that you see in your gardens, the possums ruining your trees, just sitting there looking at you in a friendly kind of way.

Another member of a local community garden explained that’s why she loves the place, “You just sit here and look up and...see all that nice bushy area, and you don’t feel like you are near the center of a 4 million population city.” Participants engaged in “group action” for sustainability were more likely to feel like they could find nature in the city.

When asked specifically about where they feel a “sense of place,” a few participants identified their strongest positive “sense of place” as being the natural environment and the planet as a whole. One of the participants, who is in her late 50s and a leader in several sustainability organizations, explained that “the place where I feel the deepest sense of place is in the natural environment, the rainforest, river, and connection with the planet as a whole.” She also remarked how she is connected to her community now, and that fosters a sense of place as well. A high school teacher in her 60s, mostly engaged in personal proenvironmental action, described herself as a bush walker; thus she finds that her strongest sense of place is “in the bush.” When describing her sense of place, a participant who manages an online environmental activist Web site said, “I feel like I definitely have a strong connection to Australia. When you get a

bigger picture of things you care about the whole thing rather a specific place...I just need gum trees." Feelings of connection with nature were described as a strong motivator for sustainability action for many participants. Not many of them, however, specifically identified natural environments as how they would define their primary "sense of place."

All the participants who expressed how connecting with nature makes them feel emotionally said it is beneficial both physically and psychologically, which helps them continue with their activism. For one participant, being out in nature makes her feel really good, especially if she is feeling angry, depressed, or stressed out. She will get out into nature, and it will completely relax her and make her "feel like she knows exactly what the point of everything is." Another participant shared how she and her husband find nature "quite renewing, invigorating, and relaxing." Another sees nature as a great therapy and thinks that ecotherapy is underutilized; she finds that the natural qualities of nature are "really beneficial to health, and for a healthy spirit as well." She suggests nature is beneficial not only physically and psychologically, but it benefits her social well-being as well. One participant also noted how getting out into nature by physical activities such as camping makes her "feel whole again," and she described it as "recharging a battery." Even the two participants who said they do not have a strong connection with nature still reported enjoying spending time in natural environments. It is clear that, for these sustainability activists, being out in nature, whether that be camping, going to the bush or ocean, or simply taking a walk through a park and noticing the singing magpies, is experienced as being beneficial to their health and well-being.

Building a sense of place over time. Several participants pointed to the development of their sense of place over time. A participant who is a recently retired high school teacher and avid community gardener also touched upon the idea of attachment and how it allows one to develop a strong sense of place. She noted that

a sense of place is something that doesn't just happen, it takes time to develop, and so once you've got it, you are very reluctant to give it up and to try and gain a sense of place in some other physical location.

Many participants agreed that living in a place for an extended period of time is essential to understanding and belonging to a certain place.

Encouraging others to find a sense of place in an urban environment. When asked whether it was possible to encourage other people to develop a sense of place, the majority of the respondents believed

that you can and that the best way is through fostering a sense of community. A participant who is in his 40s and works in a government environmental agency has first-hand experience of encouraging sense of place in individuals. His professional role is to engage harder-to-reach communities like migrant refugees in environmentally sustainable activities. When discussing how to encourage others to experience a sense of place, he suggested that people need to be engaged on a personal level in order to experience the environment and nature around them. He believes, "It's one of our abilities to be able to communicate to people a particular appreciation of some of the opportunities that we've got relating to the natural world." By giving someone a chance to connect through a personal experience, he hopes it will lead that person to have a more personal connection with the place.

Motivation for city dwellers to engage in environmental action

It is apparent from the research results presented so far that these highly motivated urban sustainability activists do experience a strong "sense of place" in the city of Melbourne. This supports the hypothesized connection between a "sense of place" and living sustainable lifestyles in an urban environment. However, when looking more closely at participants' responses to questions concerning their motivations for sustainability action, the picture becomes even more interesting.

Sense of place in Melbourne. When specifically asked whether their sense of place affects their lifestyle and motivates them toward more sustainable behaviors, 12 participants fully agreed, three participants felt that their sense of place somewhat motivates them, and four participants said that it does not. A participant who is a chairman of a community share group as well as a member of another environmental organization explained why sense of place does not motivate him as much as a connection to nature does. "For me it's not necessarily a connection to place, it's a connection to the planet or a connection to nature that is more the drive for me." It became clear that even though the majority of participants agreed that sense of place affects their lifestyle, it is *one of the factors* that motivates them to lead a more sustainable lifestyle, and the places they feel connected to are not solely within Melbourne.

For those participants who agreed that their sense of place in Melbourne does influence them to lead a more sustainable lifestyle, the most commonly cited reasons were being surrounded by like-minded people; access to environmental hubs; and people sharing, practicing, and influencing each other toward sustainability. One participant mentioned her "supportive community," while another

appreciated Melbourne's "intellectual and practical, and creative and sort of cutting-edge element...that you can plug into quite easily." One agreed that living in Melbourne allows him to be exposed to groups like Friends of the Earth, as he said, "I think having access to those hubs, or being exposed to events, and protests, it helps fulfill that vision...By hanging out with people with similar view-points...it's reaffirming." It is clear from these responses that, rather than being primary motivators of proenvironmental behaviors, these aspects of "sense of place" provide geographical locations and social groups in which to lead a more sustainable lifestyle.

So, what *does* motivate these urban sustainability activists to engage in their various forms of action? When asked what motivated them to start changing their behavior to become more sustainable (this was asked prior to the "sense of place" questions in the interview), participants tended to report similar forms of motivation. Most participants had a few reasons for becoming motivated to become more sustainable, and there were some differences between motivations reported by the three different behavioral groups. The major themes that emerged were (in descending order of frequency) education, nature, food, politics, and self-awareness.

Education. Eight out of nineteen participants noted how becoming educated about the state of the world or having teachers that were influential in their lives influenced them to become more environmentally aware and motivated them to engage in sustainability actions. One influential moment for a participant was her high school math teacher, who made being sustainable a part of his everyday life. This influenced her to live her life in a sustainable manner as well. Having influential teachers who "walked the talk" was part of another participant's inspiration as well. After taking classes in Victoria, he had teachers that truly spoke to him and influenced him to change the way he lived his life. For another participant, it was becoming educated about the environmental and social problems going on, which led him to raise awareness about himself and what he needed to do, "I think the more I learnt about the world and the state of the world the more motivated I became." Becoming educated around issues regarding the environment and the ecological crisis that the world currently faces was a factor in motivating many participants to take that first step in changing their own behavior.

Nature. Seven out of the nineteen people interviewed attributed nature as being one of their motivations for sustainability and environmental action. One participant explained how she became more environmentally aware and motivated toward sustainability when she was living in Perth and working an administrative role in an oil

and gas industry, "I really got a firsthand look at how depraved the mining and gas industry is and the waste and seeing the beautiful parts of Western Australia being decimated by progress and mining and it was just quite horrible." For people like this one participant, it was witnessing firsthand the destruction of nature that raised her awareness and inspired her to change her behavior and engage in sustainable action. A majority of the participants noted how they were partially influenced by their childhood experiences of being out in nature or having parents that showed a great respect for nature, such as by having organic gardens or taking long walks by the ocean.

Food. Five out of nineteen participants' motivation spurred from a passion for food and being concerned about our global food system. Participants whose passion stems from food generally wanted to have more control over the food they put in their bodies, and as a result it led them to become more environmentally aware and engage in various sustainable actions. One participant who is in her mid-30s said being a vegetarian for the past 20 years is what led her to become more environmentally aware and thus take action, "I think obviously being involved with the vegan and vegetarian societies, you are naturally just fed information about the environment, and how animals effect the environment." Participants who attributed food as being their main motivation behind engaging in a sustainable lifestyle remarked on how it becomes a snowball effect, and the actions for sustainability generate from there.

Politics. Five out of the nineteen participants were motivated for more political reasons. Some people were politically motivated because they felt that change needed to be made within the whole system, and the best way to do that was to get politically involved. This was the case for one participant, who became convinced that it is equally as important for governments to act as well. While she believes that personal action is important, she is also adamant that there is a need for local, state, and national governments to take action. Participants who were more politically inclined all noted how personal action is important; however, it should act more as a stepping-stone for engaging in other types of sustainable actions such as getting politically involved through campaigning or lobbying.

Self-awareness and a concern for a happy, healthy life on earth. Four out of nineteen participants' motivation partly came from a concern for the quality of their own life on earth, as well as people they love and those of future generations. This realization, as a result, led people to be what one can describe as "self-aware"—aware of oneself, including one's own feelings and behaviors. One participant

remarked how she always had a lifetime's concern about herself and the society she lives in, thus leading her to live a more socially and environmentally responsible life. She noted that "it comes back again to the sentient world, and when you love life the life we have on this planet, you can't trash it...You know that your own survival and the survival of your own species is intrinsically linked with it." Her moment of realization and self-awareness put her on the pathway of examining her own life and where her time is best spent. This ultimately led her to live as simply and as sustainably as she could and become a cofounder of a prominent sustainability organization. Although not many participants explicitly said that their motivation stems from a concern about the value of their own life, their loved ones, and those of future generations, everyone had a strong self-awareness in caring about life on earth.

Other motivations. Two participants shared how having health concerns motivated them to live a more sustainable lifestyle. One participant, a university professor in his late 60s, started leading a sustainable lifestyle many years ago. He shared how he lived an unconscious lifestyle until he had a major health problem and spent an extended period of time in a hospital, which "absolutely transformed my understanding of not the world but humanity." After this experience, he had a greater appreciation and respect for humanity and decided, in part because of this experience, to change the way that he lived his life.

Staying motivated to continue environmental action. Participants reported that leading a sustainable lifestyle in an urban setting can become frustrating and disheartening, and there are times when they want to give up. When asked what enables them to keep going, many participants said they are motivated by knowing that the individual action they are taking is making a difference even if it is only small. One participant, who works hard to inspire people to grow their own food, is able to stay motivated because she can see direct results from her action. She also likes to "share the love. Then people realize how good stuff tastes and they know exactly what they're eating and that's what's important." Positive psychological attitudes, self-belief, and having a strong core philosophy were also cited as ways of staying motivated. A few participants described how being surrounded and supported by other like-minded people helps them keep engaging in sustainable action. As a participant explained, "I'm generally around people who have similar ideas and ideals...we enforce each other's interest and motivate each other to do things." These "reinforcers," whereby people are continually seeing positive results from their actions and being supported by like-minded people, are clearly linked

to participants' sense of place because they are dependent on direct connection with the local environment and community.

How to encourage others to lead a sustainable lifestyle. Nearly every participant emphasized the importance of leading by example and ensuring that their views on the world were echoed in a similar fashion. Having influential teachers who "walk the talk" inspired a participant to do the same in his own life, "I think about their example, and the thing that made them such profound teachers was that they lived what they taught in a way that I never experienced before." A couple of participants believe that actively sharing knowledge and information with people they know is one of the best ways to encourage others toward a sustainable lifestyle. A participant who is in his late 20s just recently started changing his behavior after he started working at the farmers' market. He became motivated to start altering his lifestyle after talking to farmers and visiting the farms. He thinks people need to realize how easy it is to engage in these sustainable actions, and the first steps toward doing this are giving them the knowledge and showing them how to. A majority of the participants suggested simple actions that local Melbournians can take including eating less meat, stop buying packaged food, flying less, buying green power, stop voting for major parties, growing your own food, joining a community garden, and getting in touch with your local politician.

General Discussion

This research study sought to answer four key questions, the first being how urban environmentalists experience sense of place in their city. The sustainability activists interviewed clearly experience a strong sense of place within Melbourne, as well as in other places in the region, around Australia, and in the world. This sense of place involves, and is furthered by, experiences of connection with nature and with community. These findings are consistent with, and therefore reinforce, existing theories and research into "sense of place" and "place attachment" (e.g., Kyle & Chick, 2007; Raymond et al., 2010). Comparing the urban environmentalists' descriptions of their sense of place in Melbourne with Jennifer Cross's typology (2001) yielded a few interesting findings. For example, their descriptions of sense of place developing over time are similar to Cross's category of "biographical" relationships to place. Other aspects of these activists' connection to place correspond to "spiritual (emotional, intangible)" and "ideological (moral, ethical)" relationships to place. The activists' descriptions of their sense of place rarely, however, conform to Cross's "dependent (constrained by lack of choice)" or "narrative (mythical)" relationships to place. Some participants

described a “commodified (based on choice and desirability)” relationship with their place as they have actively chosen a place to live where they can engage in their activism and be part of a community.

Our second question was what motivates these city dwellers to live sustainable lifestyles. Participants’ primary motivation for action appears to be based on an understanding of what is happening in the world, as well as their connection with nature in the broadest sense. This connection is most often emotional and involves distress in seeing the natural environment continually degraded. Participants also attributed their motivation for action to passions for food, political change, self-awareness, and a happy, healthy life for all. There are a few differences in motivation when comparing the three types of activist. The “political action” group’s motivation was more politically related than the other two groups, and they carried a firm belief that sustainability efforts were important to engage in on a political scale. The biggest motivator for “personal action” activists was becoming educated around environmental issues and sustainability, as well as a concern for nature. Becoming more educated was also a major motivation for “group action” activists; however, a concern around food played a large role as well. This is probably related to several of the “group action” participants being community gardeners.

In asking our third question, whether sense of place motivates environmentally responsible behavior in cities, we found that sense of place is perceived by most of the participants to influence their lifestyle and sustainability behavior. However, their sense of place within Melbourne primarily provides geographical locations in which to act (homes and gardens, neighborhoods, community gardens), as well as creative, like-minded, motivated people with whom they can act (formal or informal social groups). It also provides a setting in which they can inspire others to become more sustainable. It does not appear to have provided the primary motivation to start changing their behavior to become more sustainable in the way that previous authors have suggested (Halpenny, 2010; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). The participants’ sense of place in Melbourne does provide them with direct experience of the environmental and social differences they are making, a psychological and physical “recharge,” as well as social and cultural support to *stay* motivated in their sustainability endeavors. Sense of place, therefore, appears to act as an “enabler” and “reinforcer” of sustainability behavior in a city rather than a primary “motivator.”

Our fourth question, how sense of place might be encouraged in urban environments, was addressed both by participants’ own experiences and by their theories of change. It is clear that the activists we interviewed have been able to build a sense of place in an urban environment through the close bonds and networking groups they

have been engaged in through their activism, as well as through their experiences in natural places within the city. As would be expected, these social connections were greatest for the “group action” and “political action” behavioral groups. Therefore, it appears that engaging in these activities (at least by environmentally motivated individuals) can create a sense of place in urban environments. Participants’ theories about how sense of place can be fostered include effective urban planning, increasing public awareness of opportunities for experiencing urban nature, creating a sense of community by forming groups and holding events, and contributing to a community and being valued for that contribution.

Almost every participant, regardless of the activist group she or he was associated with, reported a fairly strong connection to nature. This connection to nature acts as a constant reminder for many of the activists, reconfirming why it is important to keep living a sustainable lifestyle. For nearly all the participants, having a connection to nature is beneficial both physically and psychologically and plays a beneficial role in supporting their activism. Participants engaged in personal and group sustainability action were more likely to note that it is possible to connect with nature by walking through parks and being out in a garden. This is consistent with Scannell and Gifford’s (2010) finding that people’s attachment to natural places within their towns was associated with a general proenvironmental behavior. Many participants, particularly those engaged in political action, believe that even though nature can be found in the city, it is still important to get out of an urban setting occasionally in order to maintain a strong connection with nature. This supports Halpenny’s (2010) finding that “place attachment” with an iconic wilderness location is associated with general proenvironmental behaviors.

Although past research indicates that, in general, people living in cities have a greater disconnection from nature (Hinds & Sparks, 2008; Kellert, 2002; Schultz, 2002), this study shows that this is not necessarily the case for all urban dwellers. These sustainability activists in Melbourne clearly demonstrate a strong intention to engage with nature while living in a city, whether that be through the botanical gardens, vegetable gardens and fruit trees, or taking the time to actively seek out nature by escaping the city every once in a while. These sustainability activists, particularly those engaged in group and political action, also had high levels of engagement with their neighbors and other community members. This contrasts with Scannell and Gifford’s (2010) finding that civic place attachment was not associated with proenvironmental behaviors. Our research does support studies, however, which found that community gardens help connect people with each other and with nature and have a range of

community and individual benefits (Comstock et al., 2010). Our study suggests that the ability of community gardens to build a “sense of place” in urban environments can be widened to include other forms of group sustainability action such as neighborhood share groups, cohousing, farmers’ markets, and local food groups, as well as participation in political action organizations aiming to protect nature and encourage sustainability on a larger scale. In a similar way to community gardens, many of these activities also promote a healthy lifestyle and can help create optimism and reinforce sustainability behavior, because people can see the direct impact and results they make when they take action.

Amid the urban environment of “displacement” (Havel, 1984; Orr, 1992), where urban dwellers are becoming further and further disconnected from where our food and everything else we need physically and psychologically comes from, a social movement of sustainability activists is moving in the opposite direction. By growing and sharing food, engaging with nature and neighbors, building friendships, and actively participating in social change toward sustainability, these people are rebuilding a “sense of place” and becoming more connected to their immediate physical and social environments. For these individuals, however, this local sense of place is contextualized within a much bigger picture as they are motivated by issues and passions that lie far beyond their neighborhood or the city of Melbourne. As Tredinnick describes, these sustainability activists are relating to an expanded “home place,” remembering that they “live within a natural order” as “inhabitants of the earth” (2003, p. 27).

Future research

While our research has provided a deeper understanding of aspects of the relationship between sense of place and sustainable lifestyles in urban environments, future qualitative research could investigate whether sense of place plays a similar role for rural activists. For example, how does sense of place for rural activists differ from that for urban activists? Do rural activists experience more of a “narrative” relationship with place (Cross, 2001)? Is local sense of place more of a “primary motivator” when people live in wild and rural environments?

Future research might also take some of our findings, particularly the different roles sense of place appears to play in motivating environmental action, and develop more complex psychological scales to measure the relationship between sense of place and sustainable lifestyles in the general population. Such quantitative research could be conducted in urban and rural environments and would add to the body of psychometric work in this field.

Further investigations of *how* a sense of place emerges within an urban setting would hopefully shed light on the most effective

methods for encouraging people to engage in environmental action as well as helping people find, and experience the benefits of, a sense of place within an urban environment. A qualitative comparison between the sense of place experienced by urban dwellers who are *not* living sustainable lifestyles compared to these activists, particularly framed within Cross’s (2001) typology, could suggest which aspects of sense of place are most important to develop and which are, in contrast, detrimental. For example, are people with a “dependent” relationship to place less likely to engage in environmental action? It is also clear from our research that activists benefit from their connections with neighbors and other social networks that a city provides them with. This suggests that further research could pursue Raymond and colleagues’ (2010) finding that social bonding occurring in a place can “transfer” to a sense of connection to the physical environment. It would be useful to investigate the social bonding that takes place within a neighborhood or community and to see whether it encourages proenvironmental behavior over time. This could be done as a comparative analysis, comparing a large city to a small rural town. It is important this research be used to further determine how sense of place can be fostered in urban environments as their populations continue to increase around the world.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between sustainable lifestyles and sense of place in an urban environment. In order to address this question, we sought to understand how sustainability activists living in the city of Melbourne experience and connect to their sense of place, nature, and their community. The aim was to contribute to a better understanding of what motivates people living in an urban setting to live a more sustainable lifestyle.

Our findings suggest the importance of developing a sense of place in urban environments in order to support individuals and groups in their actions toward sustainability. While people may not be particularly inspired or primarily motivated by the place they live in, it can still act as a place for behavioral, social, and cultural change to be enacted. Sustainability activists benefit from their connection with nature in urban environments, as well as from their connections with neighbors and other social networks that a city can provide them with. Community gardens, cohousing, share groups, farmers’ markets, and political action organizations are helpful ways to build relationships with a local community while engaging in action for sustainability. They can be effective methods to create a positive “sense of place” in urban environments.

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