River Passion: Understanding How Adults Make Sense of Their Love of a River

Considerations for Fostering Human-River Relationships through Extension Watershed Stewardship Programs

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Exactly what does it mean to be passionate about a river?

What sustains a person's relationship with a river?

As public educators, understanding 'why' reveals key elements we need to consider when designing an Extension watershed stewardship program.

David Bolling (1994) in How to Save a River: Handbook for Citizen Action states "choosing to save a river is more often an act of passion than of careful calculation. You make the choice because the river has touched your life in an intimate and irreversible way, because you are unwilling to accept its loss." This study delves into the experiences and perceptions of those who outwardly demonstrate care for rivers and discover how they make meaning of their relationship with a river.

Where the passion begins...

Nel Noddings (2003) defines natural caring as a product of a "relation in which we respond as one-caring out of love or natural inclination." As an extension of Noddings' approach, if an individual's feelings for a river align with the concept of care, it is highly probable this person envisions a relationship with the river. However, Noddings (2003) views it as a one-sided relationship because the river cannot reciprocate care to the person. **So what are the motivating factors or experiences sustaining a one-sided relationship between a person and a river?**

In this study, we believe adults who interact with rivers undergo a unique and personal experience where they construct their meaning of a river. Depending on factors such as the person's beliefs, usefulness of the engagement, and the river's attributes, the experience shapes a person's views, feelings, and thoughts. We want to ascertain exactly what it means for each person to love a river and how their feelings are shaped.

Questioning Passion

Primary research question:

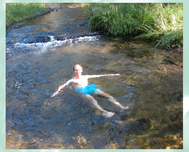
How do adults who demonstrate a passion for a river make meaning of their feelings and understand their relationship with the river?

Secondary research questions:

1. How do adults, who demonstrate their passion for a river, come to engage with a river?
2. How do adults, who demonstrate their passion for a river, sustain their relationship with a river?
3. What do adults, who are passionate about a river, find worthwhile about protecting a river?

In this study, we engage with dedicated watershed stewards through interviews. Each participate provides a photo and/or drawing illustrating their relationship with rivers.

What is a human-river relationship ?



Human river experiences are interpreted through a person's social, gendered, and cultural lenses. As an expression of a human-river relationship, some people elicit emotional attachments to the natural world, both as isolated elements and holistic understandings. Guided under an interpretivist approach, this study searches for "culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world" (Crotty, 2003). We hypothesize that people who are passionate about rivers are directed by their own motivation and understanding of how rivers relate to their lives.

Beginning to Understand River Passion

The photos below provide a visual depiction of two interviewees' perception of their human-river relationship.

Holly's human-river relationship

Chattahoochee Riverway Project

Recreation
"…taking lunch, and snacks, and spending and getting out into the river barefoot, sitting out and baking in the sun with friends, jumping into the cold water, and swimming around in the swimming holes..."

Relaxation
"the destination is to sit with your friends; and whatever happens..."

Also, Holly feels her relationship with rivers is "advocating for it, protecting it, because you know it is important."

It's about:
- **Visible contamination**
- **Finding problems, getting it fixed**
- **Empowerment**
- **Dying streams,** prevent "something else from dying"

Butch's human-river relationship

- **Visible contamination**
- **Dead stream**
  "you couldn't have any life in there, you couldn't drink the water."
- **Abuse…crime**

"It really struck home as being something that I didn't want to see."

It is premature to draw conclusions from the data; however, certain themes appear across the interviews. For Holly and Butch, it might be that abuse of a threatened river moves them into action. Also, care is likely a state of mind where they view a river in need and yearning for protection. Both agree their role is to "point out contamination problems" (Butch) and "get it fixed" (Holly) (see Figure 1). Additional data is necessary to confirm these preliminary themes.

Figure 1. Codes found in Holly & Butch's interview

What might a watershed stewardship program manager wish to consider?

Effective environmental education revolves around the ability to provide meaningful experiences within the local and cultural context of the learners. By understanding how dedicated watershed stewards make meaning and sustain their relationship with rivers, **Extension agents can provide opportunities for program participants to cultivate a personal environmental ethic of care, as well as advance their knowledge of stream ecology and conservation.**

Questions to consider:

Which river location/setting is most apt to build a participant's connection with a river?

What program activities are most likely to foster a participant's environmental ethic of care for a river?

What is the appropriate balance of time spent on the river engaging with it compared to advancing stream ecology and conservation knowledge of a participant?

Based on the factors that sustain a person's human-river relationship, what is the most critical experience Extension can provide?

The themes generated from the pilot project participants' perceptions of the human-river relationship will be used to design a regional Extension watershed stewardship curriculum. The researchers will co-construct the curriculum with Extension agents for the purpose of building community agency through water quality awareness and citizen action.

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