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Vignette 22: Sense of Place

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22 | SENSE OF PLACE IN THE SALISH SEA REGION

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Sense of place refers to peoples' bonds and meanings associated with place (Masterson et al. 2017). Sense of place tends to include: place attachment (bond or connection to place); place dependence (reliance on place for need or goal achievement); place identity (identification with place); and place meaning (descriptions or imagery that define a place). These dimensions are connected and reflect individual or shared beliefs, emotions, symbols, memories, knowledge, feelings, behaviors, and experiences (Masterson et al. 2017). Sense of place is subjective, yet patterned, providing researchers with the ability to assess shared connections, understandings, meanings, and the potential to predict behaviors or perceptions.

Sense of place is recognized as integral to ecosystem health and recovery. This recognition stems from sense of place's links to: ecosystem services (World Health Organization 2005); human well-being (Biedenweg 2016); health (Donatuto et al. 2016); conflict (Breslow 2014); cultural practices (Poe et al. 2016); responses to place change (Marshall et al. 2019); place names (Trimbach 2019a); and pro-environmental behaviors (Junot et al. 2018). A strong sense of place contributes to human well-being (Biedenweg 2016) and influences pro-environmental attitudes or behaviors, like stewardship or responses to place change (Junot et al. 2018; Marshall et al. 2019). Sense of place can be understood, if not harnessed to address ecosystem challenges and recovery actions. This vignette outlines the status of sense of place in the Salish Sea region based on a non-exhaustive review of regional research.

Since time immemorial, Indigenous communities have developed distinct human-environment relationships. These relationships reflect the centrality of place in Indigenous knowledge and worldviews, and engagements in and through place (Johnson &

Larsen 2013). These relationships are demonstrated through cultural keystone places (CKPs), or places with high biocultural diversity that are significant to people's identities and lifeways (Currier et al. 2015). For example, the Lekwungen people consider Tl'eches (an archipelago near Vancouver Island) integral to their community, as this specific place is a source of identities, knowledge, sustenance, and spirituality (Currier et al. 2015). According to Thom (2005), sense of place anchors "Coast Salish people in the world," and "continues to be experienced and thought of in uniquely Coast Salish ways," as reflected in cultural narratives and practices (Thom 2005, p. 4). Practices include activities like traditional shellfish harvesting that link heritage, experiences, and social connections to sense of place (Poe et al. 2016). Regional species like shellfish (Poe et al. 2016), orca (Colby 2013), salmon (Breslow 2014), and gray whales (Deutsch 2017) are also connected to the region's Indigenous communities, reflecting why sense of place is considered an Indigenous community health indicator, as degradation or place change could negatively impact Indigenous communities (Donatuto et al. 2016). Overall, Indigenous peoples have unique senses of place, illustrating the necessity to protect the places that have long been stewarded by these communities and the necessity to integrate Indigenous voices in environmental decision-making.

Place names are powerful symbols that contribute to and reflect sense of place. Place names denote shared or competing identities, attachments, meanings, memories, histories, languages, politics, physiographic features, and cultural narratives. The Salish Sea is a recent official place name (approximately 2009-2010) aimed to acknowledge the Coast Salish people and is not without contention (Tucker & Rose-Redwood 2015). SeaDoc Society, working closely with the author (Trimbach 2019a), co-

created a bi-national survey aimed at understanding Salish Sea geographic literacy and place name knowledge. Overall, the region's residents are largely unfamiliar with the Salish Sea as a place name in both descriptive and visual (map) forms, with British Columbia residents having greater familiarity compared to Washington residents. This lack of familiarity or use of inconsistent place names may equate to inconsistent, conflicting, or divergent senses of place among regional residents. These results highlight the power of place names and benefit, if not need, of a shared place name to foster a shared sense of place and responsibility to address shared challenges.

The Puget Sound Partnership's Human Wellbeing Survey (2018-present) and Sense of Place Vital Sign are, to the author's knowledge, the only government-supported effort to explicitly and consistently gauge sense of place of the natural environment in the region (Biedenweg 2016; Puget Sound Partnership 2019). The results reveal that 70% Puget Sound residents have a strong sense of place (index of indicators, including attachment and identity) connected to Puget Sound's environment (Fleming & Biedenweg 2019). The results highlight that residents are attached to, identify with, benefit from, and maintain positive perceptions of the environment. The findings are supported by a complementary 2019 survey (Trimbach 2019b) that shows residents' sense of place of Puget Sound's shorelines, including place meanings that emphasize the importance of

natural attributes. While, to the author's knowledge, no paralleled survey has been implemented in British Columbia, Statistics Canada has conducted national surveys, known as the General Social Survey, with a sense of place component. The 2013 results show that 45% of British Columbia residents have a strong regional (British Columbia) sense of place (belonging; Statistics Canada 2015). A 2019 survey showed that British Columbia residents do have a strong regional identity, with 75% stating their province is important for sense of place (identity; Environics Institute for Survey Research 2019). These collective findings reflect that transboundary residents do have a sense of place connected to the region and/or its environment.

Based on this review of regional research, residents appear to share a connection to the Salish Sea region, although those senses of place likely vary. This sense of place could be effectively integrated and applied in environmental planning, management, or governance to better align these efforts with how the region's communities feel, think, experience, and engage the Salish Sea and its environs. More research is also needed to better reflect the full spectrum of sense of place in the region. The author advocates for further sense of place research that better reflects regional and community sense of place diversity.



Photo: David Trimbach