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“Ways into the Forest: Place, Identity and Resource Access in California’s Northern Sierra Nevada”

Recent analyses of property relations and land tenure have focused significant attention on the role of identity in mediating access to natural resources. The general formulation has been that people invest in identities as a means to gain or maintain resource access. By investing in identity I mean the attempt to emphasize or even to construct certain attributes, whether family lineage, gender, or political affiliation, that legitimate a claim to certain resources. Writers such as Sarah Berry and Louise Fortmann have done some important work in this area applied to Western and Southern Africa as has our respondent, Nancy Peluso in Southeast Asia.

A small but growing body of literature is developing that explores the phenomenon of organizations in the rural American West using the identities rooted in notions of “place” to stake new claims on the surrounding natural resource base. Such articulations include:

- place as epistemology: site-specific ecological and management knowledge
- place as economic location: peripheral site of surplus extraction and primary resource dependence
- place as political location: exclusion from centralized management decisions and resource benefits
- place as ground zero: disproportionate impacts of resource management decisions.

I will argue that this linear and unidirectional equation:

place -->identity -->resource access

captures only some of the communities phenomenon, and that the relationships are in fact much more complicated. In particular, this framework ignores:

- place and identity are socially constructed at multiple scales
- place-based identities can restrict resource access
- problems of linking place and identity can impede resource access
- place and resource access can be used as means of identity formation

This discussion will examine these four issues through two case studies, the Quincy Library Group, and the Maidu Cultural and Development Group. Both organizations are non-governmental coalitions in California's Northern Sierra region attempting to gain increased representation in the management of federal forests in the area. Both the QLG and MCDG use the notion of "place" and place-based identities as central means to accomplish their goals, yet they define and use it very differently and with varying degrees of success.

My talk today will provide a brief "setting of the place" in the Northern Sierra, a discussion of each of my four main points, and the lessons this may offer us about common property.

Setting the Place

The Northern Sierra region in Northeastern California is one of the most forest dependent in the American West. National Forests, administered by the US Forest Service and private timber lands cover roughly three quarters of the land base; timber sector jobs (including logging, trucking, and mill work) account for over 15% of employment in many communities. Falling harvest levels on the National Forests coupled with corporate timber consolidation has resulted in Forest Service down-sizing and numerous mill-closures in turn causing significant out-migration and leaving limited employment opportunities for those who remain. "Timber wars", heated conflicts over National Forest management, has until recently polarized communities between yellow-ribbon pro-logging and green-ribbon environmental factions. This is also the ancestral and present day home land of the Maidu people.

Place and identity as socially constructed across multiple scales

The Quincy Library Group (QLG) is a consensus-based coalition of local elected officials, environmentalists, timber industry and labor union representatives, and other civic leaders. (Early meetings were held in the neutral space of the Quincy town library.) Their plan, called the Quincy Library Group Community Stability Proposal, combines a range of environmental protections (riparian standards, wildlife habitat protection, roadless area preservation) with a more reliable timber supply through fuel reduction and small group selection timber harvesting.

The place of the QLG can be seen as operating at two distinct spatial and political scales. The QLG and its Community Stability Proposal arose as a "local" response to the Forest Service's regional plan to protect the California spotted owl. Local environmentalists were concerned that the cookie-cutter approach to species protection was inappropriate to the local ecological condition of the forests and would result in more species loss as well as inadequate roadless area protection. The timber industry was concerned that the measures would essentially shut down its operations in the area. Civic leaders worried about the impacts of these shut downs on the communities. Place formed the common ground on which local (but new-comer) environmentalists and the (non-local) company which owned the local mills could forge an alliance based on a shared antagonism with the Forest Service. In the pre-QLG timber wars, the Forest Service maintained the upper point in a triangle of power which pitted environmentalists and the timber industry against each other and counter-balanced the competing pressures on the agency for increased timber harvests and forest protection. The QLG essentially inverted this

triangle by displacing the Forest Service's claim of representing common ground, and usurped this position for itself. As the champions of place against the "centralized bureaucracy" of the Forest Service, environmentalists in the QLG could now claim the high ground as local heroes not place-traitors, and timber firms could represent themselves as community-benefactors, not out-of-town capital.

While the QLG has placed itself as "local" in contrast to the regional and national (and even place-less) scale of the Forest Service, conceiving of the QLG as merely a local phenomenon would assume too simple a link between place and identity. The "QLG area" as they term the landscape to be affected by their proposal, covers 2.5 million acres, including the whole of two national forests and a major district of a third, spans six counties, and dozens of communities. The area is not an organic entity but was "produced" by the QLG itself, based on a mix of industrial, ecological, social, and institutional logics. In support of its Proposal, the QLG has drawn extensively on regional and national networks including political connections to the Clinton Administration and Congress, as well as organized labor and industry organizations. It has used these networks to go above the heads of the local and regional Forest Service leadership and to move a bill directing the Forest Service to consider implementing its proposal to a 429-1 landslide victory in the House of Representatives. The QLG shows us that identity is not naturally "based" in place, and that place is itself constructed through multiple processes on multiple scales.

Place-based identities as restricting resource access

The QLG's landslide of support has not been unanimous, however. The QLG's dual -scale place has also attracted vehement opposition from regional and national environmental organizations. While organizations such as the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society originally participated in the development of the forest plan on which the QLG bases much of its proposal, these same representatives have opposed the QLG --beginning with personal letters to the group and now with full page ads in the New York Times and letter writing campaigns to Congress. While there are a number of reasons the environmentalists give for their opposition to the group itself (the environmental impacts of the bill, the weakness of the science, the dominance of the timber industry in and over the group), the main criticisms seem to be about the precedent set by the QLG's place in forest politics.

- Too Local: The QLG is seen as "localizing" forest management decisions and taking them out of the national political space in which the environmental organizations enjoy significant power. Environmentalists have complained that even if the QLG is itself not a danger to the environment, environmental organizations cannot possibly be everywhere at once to ensure that the public interest is represented (by them). The public interest, apparently, cannot be represented locally. At the same time, the localization of forest management concerns some local environmentalists who fear that in local forums, without the support of their regional and national allies, they will be overwhelmed by timber interests.
- Not Local Enough: At the same time, the scale of the QLG proposal is criticized as being too big. The QLG's strategic (and effective) use of regional and national political support to beat the environmentalists in their home court has been represented as the Group's unforgivable unwillingness to "stay in their place." Place, apparently, is an entitlement confined to a "local" scale of political behavior and resource access.

For the moment, it appears that the QLG has been displaced on the national-scale as pressure from regional and national environmental organizations has led Senator Boxer to withdraw her support of the bill and now to actively oppose it. It is unclear how this will affect the QLG's future viability as an organization, or how it will affect place as a currency in other similar efforts in the West.

I will now turn to the case of the Maidu people of the Northern Sierra to explore my second two points.

Problems of linking place and identity

Creation stories told by the Maidu Indians tell of their origins in the Northern Sierra. Rejecting the anthropologists' story of the Bering Land Bridge migration, many claim that their people were created "right here" along with the mountains, rivers, and forests of their ancestral home land. Today, however, the Maidu have no tribal lands, governments, treaties, or settlements. In fact, according to the U.S. government, they do not exist. That is, they are "unrecognized" as a tribe. This lack of recognized identity is a significant obstacle to the Maidu's ability to articulate a place-based identity and to translate this identity into resource access.

Obstacles to grounding a Maidu identity in place can be understood through a brief history of the main "recognized" Maidu entity, the Greenville Rancheria. After losing most of their lands to miners, ranchers the army, and Indian agents the Maidu lived as hands on the ranch lands they once claimed as their own, until 1923 when they are granted a Rancheria -- a home for homeless California Indians in Greenville. The site chosen is the Indian Mission boarding school which for 40 years has worked to leach out Maidu culture from its young charges. By the 1950s, national policy has turned against the notion of reservations and Rancherias and the Greenville Rancheria was unilaterally "terminated" by the BIA in 1953. Indians living on the Rancheria were given the lands they are living on as allotments, most cannot afford the land taxes or need cash to cover debts, sell out to whites and scatter across the county. In 1973 the Tille Hardwick et. al. supreme court case "unterminates" 17 rancheria throughout the state, including the Greenville Rancheria. By now, only four Indian families are living on the site of the old Greenville Rancheria/ Mission. Maidu Indians attempt to reconstitute themselves as the Maidu Rancheria but the BIA refuses their proposal because the Maidu are not a recognized tribe, and because it holds that only those Indians who are direct lineal descendants of those living on the Rancheria lands at the time of the 1928 census can be accepted as members. The Maidu leader who wrote the original untermination proposal and who seeks the inclusion of all Maidu in the new entity is deposed in a BIA-rigged election (held at 11:30 at night with only the linear descendants notified). A new Rancheria is formed taking the name of Greenville and establishing offices in Red Bluff, 150 miles away in the Central Valley (outside of the ancestral domain of the Maidu). Today, the Greenville Rancheria is a white square on Forest Service maps, a 0 acre plot in the US Census, an empty lot still called the Indian Mision next to an Indian Pentacostal Church, a non-tribal entity and which owns no land in the Valley, in which most Maidu are not enrolled, and which is the only recognized representative of Indian Valley Indians in relations with the US Government.

Rancheria-based recognition divides the Maidu from within as individual Maidu recognized as Rancheria members gain access to federal subsidies while non-members *in their own families* are denied. The imposition of state-defined affiliation into familial and tribal relations has been a devastatingly effective divide and conquer strategy. At the same time, many Maidu youth are increasingly ambivalent about being seen as Indian. For example, when some Maidu teenagers started a teen club recently, they felt it to be too exclusionary to call it the Indian Teen Club, so they chose the Indian *Valley* Teen Club instead. Here they chose to identify with their geographic place instead of their ethnic place. With no “place” for the ceremonies and the every day transmission of culture, few Maidu youth are learning Maidu language, basketry, or other lifeways. This has prompted some Maidu elders to complain that while there may be individuals with Maidu blood in the area, the Maidu may soon disappear as a people. They would have become displaced from within. (I should note that the teens don’t necessarily share this scarcity view of culture and see their hybrid Maidu-hip hop-slacker-jock identities as viable and vibrant alternatives to both the white mainstream and the traditions of their elders.)

Resource Access: claiming a place for identity formation

The Maidu Cultural and Development Group (MCDG) is a coalition of unrecognized Maidu Indians formed in 1995 in response to a range of “place problems” facing their people. The MCDG is attempting to address these problems but not by gaining formal federal recognition as a tribe. Instead, they are staking symbolic place claims and seeking recognition as *place stewards*.

The Maidu Place Names Project is a “counter” map with Maidu names for the prominent landmarks in the Indian Valley (the area of heaviest Maidu concentration.) While current names reflect the history of white settlement and conquest, the Maidu names evoke the mythic origins as well as the natural characteristics and uses of these sites. They have taken further steps to have these names “recognized” by the Forest Service and the US Geological Survey on their maps. (USGS said Maidu had to ask permission of the “owners” of the land first. The Maidu said, what do you mean, *owners* ?) This can be seen as a symbolic reclaiming of place, an attempt to relocate the area into the “Indian Country.”

The Maidu Stewardship Project, a proposal to the Forest Service for the Maidu to engage in co-management on National Forest lands, would involve the application of traditional Maidu forest management techniques to restore degraded forest lands (including the restoration of basket-making materials and other understory species), a cultural education center with a ceremonial roundhouse, living village and ethnobotanical trails, and the protection of a sacred lake above the valley. Where the Maidu Sense of Place map staked a symbolic claim to place, the Maidu stewardship project makes this claim physical. This project is intended to lead the Forest Service and the broader community to recognize the value of Maidu ecological knowledge, and the validity of the Maidu themselves as stewards of the land. Internally, it is intended to help the Maidu community recognize themselves as powerful actors in forest management and to not always chose silence and invisibility in the face of opposition. It is also intended to establish access to places in which the Maidu can produce and reproduce their culture. For example, the lake to be protected is a site where Maidu shamans would undergo their final “doctoring” rituals. Many Maidu describe the need for such places not to subsist as individuals, but to *persist* as a people. That is, access to resources is sought to strengthen a Maidu sense of place, and in so doing,

promote a Maidu identity. it should be noted that this formulation is not problematic as some Maidu see Forest Service territory as inappropriate grounds for a Maidu place. Others question the “traditional” validity of the resource management techniques in the proposal, while still other object to a perceived sell-out of larger Maidu land claims to this miniaturized and state-sanctioned version.

Place, identity, and lessons for the study of common property:

As a corpus concerned with mediation of access to natural resources, common property literature has made important strides away from formal legalistic and economic analyses towards those which embrace cultural politics. However, to the extent that we accept essentialized notions of place, identity, and resource access, and the relationships between them, we will limit the power of our work. Place, identity and resource access can be both means and ends in a larger field of property relations. Once we get beyond a unidirectional linear formulation, all sorts of analytical possibilities emerge. Following are several lines of inquiry raised by my research which may be fruitful for other students of common property.

- Identity and place need to be explored as related but independent phenomena. We need to query the processes through which identities are “based” in place and “displaced” as entitlements for resource access.
- Place is not synonymous with location, and not all places are local. How is the scale of a particular place negotiated, and what are the implications of such a scale for mediating resource access?
- Identity needs to be seen as process, not a possession to be carried, passed down, and/or lost. As a moving target, how does identity formation draw from discourses of place to form a range of resource access strategies?