



Thad Box

Youth, Sense of Place, and Land Care Professionals

Every culture, every society, celebrates its youth. Part of this is biologically driven. If the young do not succeed, genes will not be passed to the next generation. Our youth also form a social security account, protecting us, fighting our wars, and providing us care in our old age. Perhaps even more important, they are vessels that carry our societal values into the future.

Survival of our concepts of right and wrong, a better world, and what it means to be human depends on our young accepting and applying our principles, ideals, and values. Often how they apply those principles to things we think important may be very different from what we imagined. It is important that principles be stable. The world changes.

To insure that our land care profession is relevant in future generations, three things are especially important: First, our youth must understand science, the interaction of factors in the environment. Second, the science must be ethically applied. Third, the practitioners of our profession must know who they are and where they practice. They must be educated, not just trained.

Understanding of science and interconnectedness in our environment comes from education—both from formal learning and from our life stories. We accredit schools to assure they are teaching what our profession needs. Sharing life experiences is the responsibility of all of us.

Ethical application of principles comes primarily from working with ethical people. A Carnegie study showed that students taking ethics courses did not necessarily behave ethically, but doctors and ministers who studied under and worked with ethical professionals almost always performed ethically. Ethical performance in our profession, then, depends on our ethical practitioners taking our youth in tow and becoming mentors to them.

For young people in our land care profession to know who they are is largely determined by how well they relate to the land—a sense of place. The writer Wendell Berry said, “If you don’t know where you are, you don’t know who you are.”

The thought that we must know our land intimately before we can know ourselves is really powerful. The idea that knowing our place, and ourselves, can be applied to land health, and thus to the welfare of future generations, is central to our profession. The concept is viewed in at least four broad categories.

One is a bioregional view embraced by ecologists, environmentalists, conservationists, and students of nature. Simply put, it argues that one must know all there is to know about the natural world in a bioregion—plants, animals, geology, watersheds, everything—to gain a sense of place. This sense of place, based on science, leads to an understanding of humans’ role in nature. That understanding guides people to enlightened land use.

Another is a literary view put forward by writers, poets, artists, mystics, and philosophers. It says one gains a sense of place by inward explorations of self—what it means to be human. These inward explorations, leavened by words in great literature, develop a spiritual core that supports the individual physically and spiritually. That spirituality leads the individual to live an enlightened lifestyle compatible with the land.

A historical view among archeologists, historians, and folklorists says that one gains a sense of place by what happened at the place. Wallace Stegner, in his essay "Sense of Place," wrote, "No place is a place until things that happened in it are remembered in history, ballads, yarns, legends, monuments...it is made by slow accrual, like a coral reef." Exploration of that process of change leads to an understanding of why things happened. That understanding of the past can lead to visions of the future.

A minority view, mainly held by spiritualists, shamans, and some evolutionists, believes there is something innate in humans that causes them to identify with place. Some unknown power—past lives, genes, God's will—resides in people that make them bond with place. For instance, I was born and raised far from an ocean. But I am instantly at peace on a beach. Some claim the innate bonding creates a sense of responsibility that leads to enlightened decisions about land use.

The understanding of scientists, poets, philosophers, and historians are all important if a sense of place is to help our land care profession. Knowledge of the environment and an understanding of self must be linked to natural and human-caused events.

Stegner wrote, about Berry's statement, "...He is not talking about the kind of location that can be determined by looking at a map or a street sign. He is talking about the kind of knowing that involves the senses, the memory, the history of a family or tribe. He is talking about the knowledge of place that comes from working in it in all weathers, making a living from it, suffering from its catastrophes, loving its mornings or evenings or hot noons, valuing it for the profound investment of labor and feeling that you, your parents and grandparents, your all-but-unknown ancestors have put into it. He is talking about the knowing that poets specialize in."

That is the kind of sense of place that people close to the land—farmers, ranchers, pioneers—understand well. It is the kind of sense that guides a land care professional. It is passed on in cultural history—stories from those close to the land. But it is a sense that is not automatically available to our youth as they live their hectic, nomadic, technology-driven lives. Therein lies the challenge of relating our profession to a sustainable future.

Somehow, some way, the young must be led to know that what we now see as "natural" is a combination of natural and human-induced happenings on our land. In prehistory our place had low human population densities that changed the land only locally. Even the extractive exploits of the first white mountain men had minimal effects.

It was European domination that drastically changed western rangelands. In three decades the west went from wilderness to a thriving culture with a shortage of natural resources. Pioneers left mountains without trees, rangelands without grasses, and mud sliding down to cover towns and farms. Today different vegetation clothes those mountains, but they will never be the same.

To make our current lands sustainable, modern science must be applied by stewards who develop a personal land ethic. When people understand we are all essential parts of the land, we may be able to counter an ownership society that makes land a commodity.

How do we do that? Stegner suggested that, "No place, not even a wild place, is a place until it has had that human attention that at its highest reach we will call poetry...Neither the country nor the society we built on it can be healthy until we stop raiding and running, and learn to be quiet part of the time, and acquire the sense not of ownership but of belonging."

Maybe among our youth we will raise up a poet. Until she speaks for rangelands, let us contemplate Robert Frost's, "The Gift Outright."

*The land was ours before we were the land's.
She was our land more than a hundred years
Before we were her people. She was ours
In Massachusetts, in Virginia,
But we were England's, still colonials,
Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,
Possessed by what we now no more possessed.
Something we were withholding made us weak
Until we found out that it was ourselves
We were withholding from our land of living,
And forthwith found salvation in surrender.
Such as we were we gave ourselves outright
(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)
To the land vaguely realizing westward,
But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,
Such as she was, such as she would become.*

Our professional efforts—in the home, K-12, college, writings, mass media, our life stories—must meld sense of place into a reality that land does not belong to us, we belong to the land. And this understanding has to be reached in rural areas, in towns, and in metropolitan areas with an economy based on world trade, consumption, and instant gratification. Bring on the poet. ♦