



NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS FOR URBAN POPULATIONS NC-4902

A Research Work Unit of the North Central Research Station, Forest Service, US Department of Agriculture



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Why Special Natural Places Are Important to People

The attachments that many people feel toward special places in natural environments are an important part of their lives. **The natural places that people care about are increasingly vulnerable to landscape change from development, urban sprawl, fire, and resource management activities.** Therefore, it is important for resource managers and planners to recognize the importance of special places and to consider how they are affected by land management and development policies.



To better understand why people consider certain places to be "special," surveys were carried out asking people to explain in their own words what such places meant to them. The surveys spanned a wide diversity of people and places on public and private land. The respondents included life-long residents, seasonal vacationers, first-time visitors, recreationists, environmentalists, and natural resource professionals. The geographic regions targeted by the surveys ranged from the rustic and undeveloped north woods of Wisconsin and Michigan to the heavily industrialized southeast side of Chicago.

Many similar themes appeared across these diverse respondents and geographic areas. Special places were valued for their naturalness, beauty, and peacefulness. Some special places gave people a sense of remoteness or isolation, and provided a refuge where they could find solitude, privacy, and escape from stress. Social ties and interactions with other people also played an important role in many people's experiences of special places. Some special places evoked a sense of historical and natural heritage, and seemed timeless and unchanging compared to the rapidly changing landscapes around them. Some people had powerful experiences of awe, wonder, or spirituality in their special places.

People wanted their special places to be managed carefully. For some this meant preserving and protecting the place from human influence; while for others it meant actively managing or restoring the environment. When built features and facilities were present, people wanted them to be well-designed, well-maintained, and in harmony with the natural character of the surroundings. While some management to improve access to special places was appreciated, most people did not want their special places to become crowded and over-developed. Many were concerned about the impact that increased visitation and development would have on the tranquility and natural character of their special places.

These findings have important implications for land and resource planning in the face of rapid urban, suburban, and tourism development in natural landscapes. Policies that maintain quiet, uncrowded, natural settings for experiences such as serenity, refuge, and exploration can make an important contribution to the quality of many people's lives. Keeping certain places in a relatively unchanged state can provide people with a sense of connection to their personal past as well as the heritage of their family, community, and culture. People appreciate opportunities to express their feelings concerning their special places to the planners and managers who make decisions about these places. Surveys such as these can identify specific locations that are special to people, highlight issues and concerns that are important in managing these places, and help planners and managers appreciate the importance of treating such places with care and respect.