



## *Experiencing Nature in Special Places*

Surveys in the North-Central Region

### Herbert Schroeder

ABSTRACT

The experiences people have in natural environments can be very important to them, even though these experiences are sometimes hard to categorize and measure. In a series of qualitative surveys, I asked people to describe special outdoor places and explain in their own words what these places meant to them. Their responses revealed many similarities in the highly valued experiences that occurred across diverse respondents and places. By treating special places with care, managers and planners can help ensure that opportunities for such experiences will continue to be available to people.

**Keywords:** public participation; recreation; wilderness

The experiences people have in natural environments can be an important part of their lives. When people have highly valued aesthetic and emotional experiences in specific places

or types of settings, these places and settings take on particular importance for them and become "special places." People become attached to such places, in much the same way that they be-

come attached to a good friend or a family member. When a person's "special place" is lost or altered by a human action such as a timber harvest or a construction project, or by a sudden natural change such as a fire or a blow-down, the person may experience intense emotions such as grief and anger.

The attachments people feel toward certain places and the experiences that these attachments are based on are

**Above:** Wilderness Ranger Brandee Wenzel enjoys the view of Clearwater Lake on the Superior National Forest, Minnesota.

sometimes difficult to define, categorize, and explain in precise, logical terms, but it is still important to recognize their significance and to consider how they might be affected by resource management and development policies. The importance of taking into account the feelings people have toward natural places and environments has been increasingly recognized in the field of resource management over the past several years. For example, Williams et al. (1992) challenged the prevailing "commodity" metaphor for recreation settings, which views settings as if they were consumer products, and presented data on the emotional and symbolic attachments people have to wilderness places. Mitchell et al. (1993) discussed several possible ways of incorporating emotional attachments to special places into the planning process for public land management. The most recent version of the USDA Forest Service Scenery Management System handbook (USDA-FS 1995) cited the importance of special places and opened with an evocative description of a visitor's experiences in such a place.

Williams and Stewart (1998) examined the emerging concept of "sense of place" and offered recommendations for how it can be applied to ecosystem management. By analyzing written public comments on a national forest's management plans and projects, Vining and Tyler (1999) showed how people's concerns over public land management are motivated by their underlying values and emotions relating to the environment.

To better understand the values, feelings, and experiences that lead people to consider certain outdoor places as "special," I have carried out a series of open-ended, qualitative surveys in which people wrote about special places and explained what these places meant to them. Spanning a period of 15 years, these surveys have revealed a diverse assortment of experiences occurring across different types of respondents and places. This article summarizes some of the most significant themes from these surveys that convey how and why special places are so highly valued.

Each of the individual surveys was conducted in a somewhat different context and was intended to provide input to management policies and plans within that context. Therefore, the design of the surveys, the recruiting of participants, and the instructions given to participants varied somewhat between surveys. In general, participants in the surveys were recruited through announcements distributed by mail, at meetings of interest groups and organizations, in local newspapers, and at offices of land management agencies. Thus, the participants were a self-selected sample of people who felt strongly enough about at least one special place to take the time to write about it on the survey.

Participants were invited to think of one or more places that were important, special, or memorable to them within a particular geographic area. They were instructed to briefly describe each place and to express whatever thoughts, feelings, memories, and associations came to mind in connection with these places, as well as any general comments they had about the area covered by the survey and about the survey itself. Participants were provided with forms on which to write their responses and a stamped envelope for mailing back the completed form. A brief description of each survey is given below and in *table 1*.

*The Morton Arboretum.* The first survey was done at the Morton Arboretum in the Chicago suburb of Lisle, Illinois, to learn how arboretum members and volunteers experienced the many formal, informal, and natural landscapes of this popular site. Participants were recruited through announcements in the arboretum newsletter and at a training session for arboretum volunteers (Schroeder 1991).

*The Black River.* This survey was carried out as part of the planning process for the largely undeveloped Black River corridor on the Ottawa National Forest, near Bessemer in northern Michigan. Participants were recruited through the forest's public involvement mailing lists, as well as fliers and announcements distributed in the Black River area and nearby communities (Schroeder 1996b).

*Upper Peninsula, Michigan.* This survey was completed by commercial woodland managers who attended a workshop on social science research methods for employees of a large paper company in northern Michigan. The geographic area specified in the survey was the entire Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

*Chequamegon area, Wisconsin.* The geographic area for this survey consisted of Bayfield, Ashland, and Sawyer Counties in northern Wisconsin, which includes the Chequamegon Na-

**Table 1. The Special Places surveys, at a glance.**

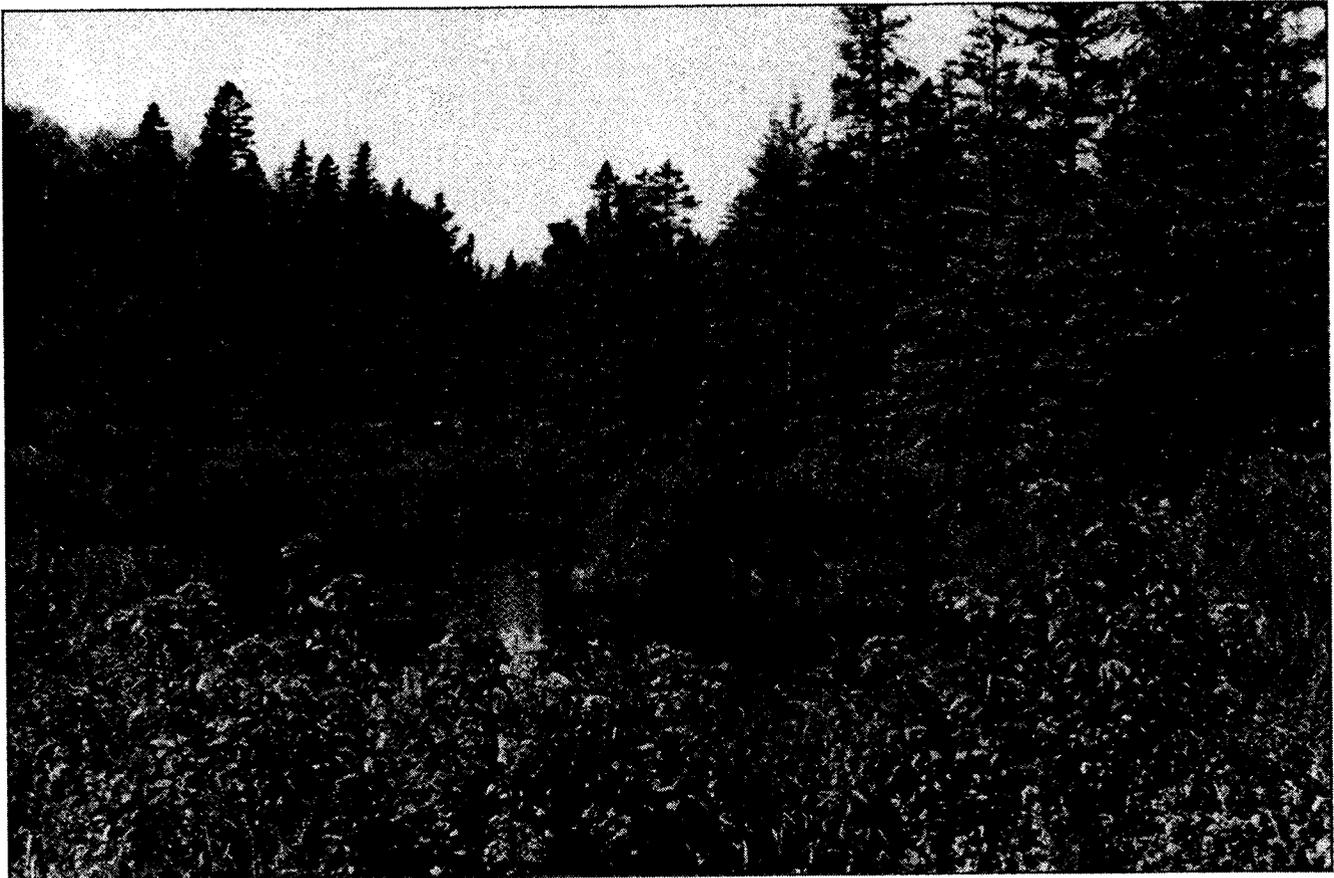
Survey location	Year	Respondent characteristics	Number of respondents	Number of place descriptions
Morton Arboretum, Chicago suburb	1986	Arboretum members and volunteers	29	126
Black River, Michigan	1993	Residents and visitors	24	66
Upper Peninsula, Michigan	1996	Commercial woodland managers	15	36
Chequamegon area, Wisconsin	1996	Residents and visitors	11	33
Moose Lake, Wisconsin	1997	Residents	10	20
Lake Calumet area, Chicago	2000-01	Residents and visitors	26	77
Total			115	358



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**Clockwise from top left: Brett Racette trains for the Chequamegon Fat Tire Festival race on one of the backroads of the Chequamegon National Forest, Wisconsin; Forest Ranger Terry Eggum paddles into the Boundary Waters in the Superior National Forest, Minnesota; a small pond is a feast for the eyes on Michigan's Isle Royale.**

tional Forest. Participants were recruited through fliers and announcements distributed by environmental organizations and newspapers in that region.

*Moose Lake, Wisconsin.* This survey was distributed to members of a local residents' group concerned about land-use issues in the Moose Lake area near Hayward in northern Wisconsin. The geographic scope specified in the survey was the same as for the Chequamegon area survey.

*Lake Calumet area.* This survey was

carried out during the planning process for the ecological and economic revitalization of the Lake Calumet area on the southeast side of Chicago. The Lake Calumet area contains significant remnant ecosystems and habitats intermixed with heavy industrial development. Participants were recruited through announcements and fliers distributed at public meetings and through newsletters and e-mail lists of environmental groups interested in the Calumet area.

Taken together, these surveys span a

wide diversity of people and special places located on both public and private land. The geographic areas range from the heavily urbanized, industrial landscapes of Chicago to the rustic and undeveloped north woods of Wisconsin and Michigan. In total, 115 people participated in these surveys, including lifelong residents, seasonal vacationers, first-time visitors, recreationists, environmentalists, and natural resource professionals. These participants provided 358 separate descriptions of landscapes, plus numerous additional comments.

I analyzed each survey individually using a method similar to the "open coding" procedure described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). I read all the responses and identified features of special places and commonly occurring themes in the respondents' experiences of those places. I organized these themes into an outline with detailed subthemes grouped under more general themes. The outline developed from each survey then served as a basis for a written summary of the most prominent themes in that survey. More details on the process I used for interpreting and summarizing the survey responses can be found in earlier publications (Schroeder 1991, 1996b, 2000).

Many similar features and themes appeared in the place descriptions across the diverse respondents and geographic areas covered by these surveys. Although there were also differences—often reflecting variations in the character of the regional setting and the personal and professional backgrounds of the participants—this article focuses mainly on the significant common themes that appeared in many people's survey responses.

### Environmental Features

The special places described by survey participants ranged from open prairie, meadow, and shoreline settings to dense forests. Within each geographic region, special places included unmanaged natural settings as well as places with substantial human influence and development.

Water features were often mentioned in descriptions of the places that respondents selected as special. These included lakes, rivers, and streams and their shorelines and beaches. Lake Superior was an especially important feature of many special places in northern Michigan and Wisconsin. Topographic and geologic features such as hills, bluffs, and ridges were also mentioned, in some cases because they provided points for viewing the wider landscape. More ephemeral physical effects of atmosphere, weather, and lighting also contributed to the experience of many special places.

The vegetation most often described in respondents' special places included

**Table 2. Selected comments from survey participants on experiences, meaning, and value of special places**

Category	Verbatim comments from surveys
Naturalness	"We appreciate the rustic and primitive character of the whole Black River area."
Beauty	"I've walked through this area at least a hundred times, and it's beautiful in all seasons of the year." [Morton Arboretum]
Awe	"We were stunned when we got to the top and looked out towards the bay. It was the wonder and awe a child gets about the world." [Chequamegon area]
Serenity	"I like the pastoral character of the south half of the [Upper Peninsula, Michigan]—really peaceful."
Excitement	"I remember we all went from one clump of flowers to another as excited as if discovering gold." [Morton Arboretum]
Remoteness	"Although only a seven-minute drive from my home, it seems far removed from my daily surroundings." [Lake Calumet]
Refuge, escape	"I like the isolation, the ability to escape the phone, TV, the effects of civilization." [Upper Peninsula, Michigan]
Social ties	"Many, many memorable moments with dear friends, and/or groups." [Lake Calumet]
Family history	"Grandpa's cabin was built [on Black River] at the turn of the century. My grandparents were a part of the park history."
Heritage	"When I stop on Madeline [Island], the history takes over. I realize this was the home for the Ojibwe people for many years. Their history on Madeline intrigues me to no end." [Chequamegon area]
Strong attachments	"We love [Moose Lake] so much we would not consider retiring anywhere else but here."
Gratitude	"With the world becoming such a busy place I am thankful to have a retreat like [Moose Lake] to come to!"

trees, wildflowers, other wild plants, and grass. A wide range of ecosystem and habitat types were represented, including forest, savanna, prairie, and meadows. More formal or designed settings (e.g., parks, lawns, and formal gardens) were included in some respondents' place descriptions. Birds, fish, and other wildlife were also a feature of many respondents' special places.

In addition to the natural features of the environment, people and human-made features were also a part of some special places. Many of the respondents included family members, friends, other visitors, managers, and historical figures in their descriptions of special places. Trails, roads, cabins, and a variety of recreation facilities were among the most frequently mentioned human artifacts. Evidence of human management of the landscape, such as timber harvesting and landscape design, were also described in connection with some special places.

### Experiencing Special Places

When asked to explain what makes the places they chose to write about so valuable to them, the survey participants brought up a wide range of meanings, values, experiences, and memories associated with these places. *Table 2* provides some verbatim examples of some of the most salient of these themes as they were expressed in the survey responses.

One reason that many special places were valued was for their naturalness. Respondents appreciated the rustic, primitive, and relatively pristine character of these places and their facilities. These settings provided respondents with an opportunity to get close to nature and to experience "wilderness," even in regions where there is heavy urban and industrial development. The variety and diversity of animals, plants, and other natural features contributed to their appeal. Respondents enjoyed observing natural processes and cycles

of change, such as the seasons and the weather, in their special places. Respondents often commented on the uniqueness of the natural features in their special places and on the contrast between these natural places and other more developed settings.

Beauty was one of the most often mentioned of the qualities of special places. Beauty was often described visually in terms of scenic features of the landscape. In addition to the visual sense, other senses such as smell and hearing often added to the aesthetic experience of special places. For many respondents, the experience of beauty went beyond pretty scenery to involve a deeper emotional response to the aesthetic character of the setting. In some cases, respondents experienced their special places as awe-inspiring, impressive, and even overwhelming in their beauty and the power of the natural forces evident there. Such places could evoke a sense of wonder and magic. These experiences were sometimes difficult to express in words and called forth ideas or images of a spiritual or religious character.

Another frequently mentioned quality of special places was quietness and serenity. The tranquility of the setting enabled respondents to relax and to experience a sense of peacefulness within themselves. Some respondents used the quietness of their special place as an opportunity for meditation and

reflection and reported feeling refreshed or renewed after visiting the place. At the same time, there was also a sense of excitement in some respondents' experience of their special places. This was especially apparent when a person was in a more active mode of interaction with the setting—exploring, making discoveries, and being surprised by new things.

Some special places gave respondents a sense of remoteness or isolation. In these places, respondents reported that they felt far away from the developed, civilized world. Some said they felt as if they have entered a whole different world from their usual daily life. These places provided a refuge where respondents could find solitude, privacy, and escape from the stress of the city and everyday life. It is interesting to note that the feeling of remoteness did not always depend on the place being physically far away from developed locales. In some cases, a special place provided a sense of isolation and refuge even though it was located quite close to more populated areas.

As a counterpoint to the themes of privacy and isolation in the survey responses, social ties and interactions with other people also played a role in some respondents' experiences of special places. Many special places were valued as settings for positive interactions between the person and his or her family, friends, and neighbors. For re-

spondents who had lived in or had been coming to their special place over a long period of time, the place might be linked with memories of their childhood or with their family's history and tradition. Special places could also evoke a broader sense of historical and natural heritage, reaching back to a time before the landscape was heavily affected by development. For some respondents, these places seemed timeless and unchanging compared to the rapidly changing landscapes around them. Several respondents described how their special place enabled them to "travel back in time" to their childhood or to earlier historical eras.

The participants in these surveys had accumulated many vivid, lasting memories of their special places and had developed strong attachments to these places. For some, these bonds had developed over many years, while for others an emotional connection was formed on their very first visit. The strong positive feelings that the survey participants had for their special places were reflected in their frequent use of words such as "great," "wonderful," "perfect," and "best" in describing their places. The value and attraction these places held for respondents was sometimes expressed metaphorically by referring to a special place as a "jewel" or "treasure," or as a "heaven" or "paradise."

Respondents expressed appreciation and gratitude for the opportunity to live in or visit the places they described on the survey and gave strong praise to those managers who they felt had treated their special places with care. A few of the participants closed their comments by thanking me for giving them the opportunity to express their feelings about their special places on the survey.

### Management of Special Places

Table 3 gives some examples of comments relating to how special places are managed and developed. Respondents wanted these places to be treated carefully and with respect. For some respondents and places this meant preserving and protecting the place from intrusive human use, development, and logging, whereas for oth-

**Table 3. Selected comments from survey participants on management and development of special places.**

Category	Verbatim comments from surveys
Preservation	"The north end of Moose Lake is truly a wilderness area and needs to be preserved. Please do all you can to leave it in its natural state."
Active management	"Hardwood stand—selectively thinned twice in past 25 years. Means renewable resource is being managed in best form." (Upper Peninsula, Michigan)
Human-nature cooperation	"Maintained and landscaped displays of plantings. Man and nature working together to create beauty." (Morton Arboretum)
Easy access	"It was close to home and great for quick getaways to cool off and enjoy the sun, water, and friends." (Lake Calumet)
Design and maintenance	"The campground on Black Lake is perfect. Very well maintained, yet rustic. Lots of space between the camp sites." (Chequamegon area)
Development and use levels	"I feel we are developed enough. I have never seen as many people down Black River Road as I have this year."

ers it meant actively managing or restoring the environment. Although many special places were valued for their naturalness and lack of human influence, there was also a theme expressing the possibility of a positive or harmonious cooperation between humans and nature in the design and management of special places.

Many respondents said they appreciated having special places that were easy to get to. They supported management actions and facilities that made places more easily accessible, especially when these facilities were well-designed, well-maintained, and fit into the rustic character of the surroundings. At the same time, most respondents did not want their special places to become too crowded and developed. Although not everyone objected to increases in development and use over time, overall there was a strong concern about the impact that visitation and development could have on the tranquility and natural character of special places, especially in the north woods.

### Discussion

Survey respondents described a diverse array of experiences, meanings, and values that contributed to the specialness of the places they wrote about. Amid the diversity of these responses, there were a number of common themes—such as serenity, refuge, and beauty—that appeared across the responses of different kinds of people in different regions of the Midwest. Many of these themes are also similar to ones that emerged from Vining and Tyler's (1999) content analysis of National Forest Plan public comment letters.

These themes have important implications for land and resource planning in the face of increasing urban, suburban, and tourism development in natural landscapes. The natural places people described as special provide habitat not only for plant and animal species but also for highly valued human experiences and activities. The interrelationship between humans and these environments forms a sort of "experiential ecology" that is affected by

management and development policies (Schroeder 1996a). Policies that provide and preserve quiet, uncrowded, natural settings as "niches" for experiences such as beauty, serenity, refuge, and exploration can make an important contribution to the quality of many people's lives. In the midst of rapidly changing and developing landscapes, protecting and maintaining certain places in a relatively unchanged state can provide people with a sense of connection to their personal past as well as to the history and heritage of their family, community, and culture.

Open-ended surveys such as these, targeted on a particular geographic area, provide people with a way to convey their feelings and values about special places to the planners and managers who make decisions that affect these places. Input from this type of survey can help identify specific locations within a region that are special to people, environmental features that contribute to a place's character, and issues and concerns that are important in

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managing and planning for these places. This information could be a valuable part of the constituent assessment carried out as one component of the Forest Service Scenery Management System (USDA-FS 1995). In a more general way, listening carefully to how people describe their experiences of special places can help planners and managers appreciate why these places matter to people and the importance of treating such places with care and respect.

### Conclusion

A news release in fall 2001 announced that the USDA Forest Service and the National Park Service would waive entrance fees during the upcoming Veteran's Day weekend to "help Americans find comfort and solace after the tragic events of September 11" (USDA-FS 2001). The news release quotes Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth as saying, "National forests and grasslands can offer calm and peaceful experiences and spiritual renewal." This gesture on the part of

public land management agencies acknowledges the importance of the experiences people have in natural places. By learning about special places and what they mean to people, natural resource professionals can help ensure that such places will always be available to provide these kinds of highly valued experiences.

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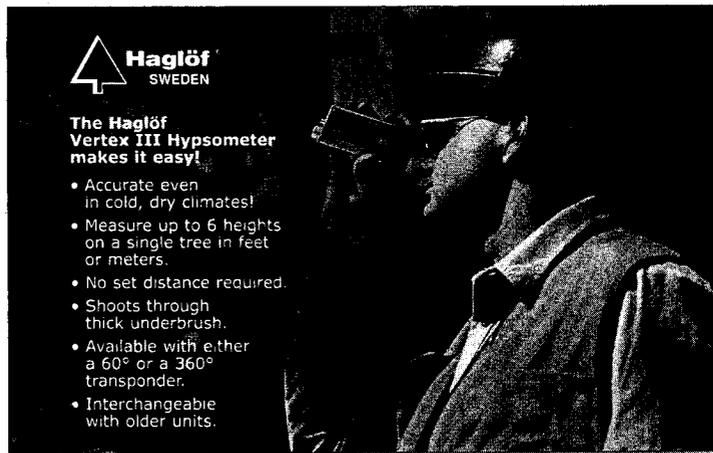
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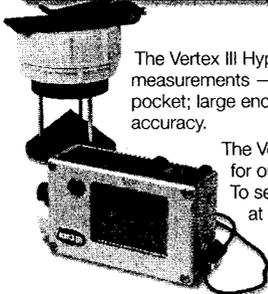
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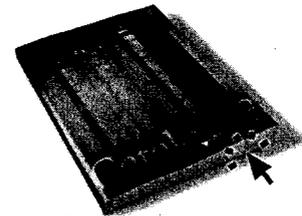
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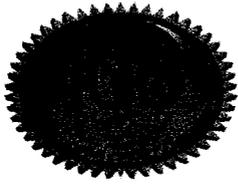
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