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On Sacred Land: Ethics and place attachment in an Indigenous cultural landscape.

A case study of Bears Ears National Monument

Abstract of Master's thesis, University of Hohenheim 2025

There is a well-established relationship in the environmental psychology literature between place attachment and human behavior. Each of the studies that have explored this relationship, in the context of national parks, have specifically investigated a form of 'environmentally responsible behavior.' In light of the growing recognition of Indigenous cultural landscapes within protected areas in the U.S., I contend that visitors have an ethical obligation to both natural environment and cultural dimensions of landscapes. There are yet no studies that have investigated culturally responsible behavior in relation to place attachment. To address this knowledge gap, I use the specific case of Bears Ears National Monument (BENM) and the place-based ethical framework of Visit With Respect to explore the relationship between culturally responsible behavior and place attachment in the context of a cultural landscape.

The overarching aim of this research is to investigate the ethics that guide the ways in which visitors interact with and relate to the Bears Ears cultural landscape, explore connections between this behavior and environmental psychology, and propose recommendations for how Bears Ears National Monument might foster greater cultural awareness and respectful visitation among its visitors. I specifically address the following research questions: 1) Do visitors' descriptions of their own behavior in Bears Ears correspond with place-based cultural ethics (Visit With Respect) or general environmental ethics (Leave No Trace), and how do these descriptions reveal differences between the two ethical paradigms? 2) How does visitor-reported behavior relate to feelings of place attachment or connectedness with nature? 3) What contributes to visitors' place attachment and how can the monument managers foster greater connection between visitors and Bears Ears? I assessed two concepts in environmental psychology—place attachment and connectedness with nature—in order to determine whether any relationship that existed between culturally responsible behavior and environmental psychology was of a general nature (i.e. connectedness to nature), or place-specific, and therefore subject to the management of BENM (i.e. place attachment).

I conducted semi-structured interviews with visitors to BENM, involving a combination of open-ended and rank/frequency-based questions. To analyze my data I used both qualitative (content and thematic analysis using inductive coding) and quantitative methods (descriptive statistics and a Fisher Exact test). This mixed-methods approach to my analysis allowed for deep engagement and interpretation of qualitative themes, as well as testing of statistical relationships between visitor behavior and place attachment.

The majority of visitors I interviewed expressed care for the cultural landscape through descriptions of place-based cultural ethics that reflected the Visit With Respect paradigm. These respondents reported high feelings of place attachment and provided rich characterizations of their cognitive and emotional bonds to Bears Ears. I found a strong relationship between place attachment (including the cognitive and behavioral components) and culturally responsible behavior; but no statistical association with connectedness with nature. Emergent patterns from respondents' descriptions of their place attachment, in combination with their recommendations for the monument, offer critical insight into how BENM could improve its interpretive materials to foster respectful visitation by deepening visitors' attachment to Bears Ears.