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In My Place

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Home. The most common household dictionaries offer nearly 15 different definitions for the term—a place of residence, a congenial environment, a place of origin. Any child could tell you that a bird's home is in a tree, a bear's home is in a den, and their home is in a house. Yet, as we get older, the concept of home becomes much broader and begins to incorporate memories, people, experiences, and landscapes.

When asked where they are from, this year's Landscape & Livelihood students will tell you not only the town they live in, but the context from which they are arriving—a little town on the south shore of Lake Superior, the foothills of the Appalachians, or in the midst of fields of corn. Somewhere along the way, the place in which we work, play, and raise families becomes a part of the structure that makes us who we are. Somewhere along the way, we acquire a sense of place.

In the winter of 2008, I found myself in a mildly panicked search for a senior thesis topic. As a former Landscape & Livelihood student and previous Northwest Connections intern, my mind revisited the people I had met here in the Seeley-Swan Valley—ranchers, foresters, environmental educators, and community members—residents of a community that understood and loved this valley in a myriad of different ways.

Somewhere along the way, I found myself tied to this place, and the questions started to rise: Does *everyone* have a personal relationship to a landscape? What is it that connects a person to a

place? Where do people's relationships to land overlap? Do they overlap? What could this mean for the future of land management?

The place to start looking for the answers to these questions was in the relationships themselves. Suddenly, a thesis project began to take shape and it wasn't long before it had a name: *In My Place*—a community-writing project based on people's individual relationships to land.

A call was put out for essays, 300 to 600 words in length, detailing how individuals' lives intersected with the landscapes of their homes—how they relied on them, remembered them, learned from them, and grew to be a part of them.

Three hundred and twenty requests for submissions were mailed out. By the time the deadline for submissions arrived, *In My Place* had received 94 essays, with 12 from the Seeley-Swan itself. Each essay was unique, deeply moving, and seemed to confirm the belief that everyone has a relationship to land and that *all* relationships, no matter the motivating factor, are important to illuminating how we as humans interact with the landscapes around us.

Steve Lamar, a resident of Condon, was one of these submitters. In his submission, Steve wrote sincerely, "I fell in love with Swan Valley the first time I experienced it... Thirty-two years later that love has only intensified. The wildness of this area coupled with its rustic, rural lifestyle is what originally drew my wife and I here. As we have gotten to know the landscape and the people better, that original appeal has only grown deeper."

Indeed, there is something magical about this place—this quiet, forested valley in the mountains of northwest Montana—that captures the mind and stirs up the heart. It's a community where land is a present part of everyday life. In his essay, Steve continues that, "...the people, their stories, and their knowledge... Here, people and the land seemed more intertwined and not so separate as in other parts of the nation. Their stories and lifestyles bore it out. "

It's a powerful force this sense of belonging to a landscape and in my experience, and through the words of the *In My Place* submitters, it is apparent that the people of the Seeley-Swan *know* their place and are truly emotionally, economically, and culturally invested in the land. Neil Meyer, a retired logger and resident of Condon, explains this tie to the valley in his own essay, "When in this country, if you wanted to work, the forest was there providing jobs... This way of life gave me a deep respect for trees in the forest and for this place. After all, this forest puts a roof over our head, heat in the fireplace, and food on the table."

The effort to conserve land, and the effort to conserve ways of life do not have to be polarized initiatives. The essays of *In My Place* have exemplified this by offering small, personal glimpses into land relationships that are shaped by resources and experiences on a landscape. There's power in realizing and articulating one's relationship to land—stories can be a centering force for our communities and their futures.

It was the underwritten goal of *In My Place* to give voice to these personal stories and to start unpacking the tremendous value in the experiences they share. The hope is that we can learn to design a new kind of land movement— to breed a kind of conservation that stems from the most basic relationships of human life and land. A kind of conservation that gives communities the tools they need to mobilize local knowledge, foster conservation initiatives on the ground, and work to build and restore balance with the landscape—their landscapes.

As Neil Meyer puts it, "With the roots we've established here—it would be impossible to pull them up." With roots like the ones in the Seeley-Swan and a sense of home so tied to a place, this community already has all the tools it needs to start walking confidently into the future.

For more information about the *In My Place* project, contact Cori Stanek at InMyPlace.project@gmail.com