Introduction: Placing the Research

(from *Developing a Compassionate Sense of Place: Environmental and social Conscientization in Environmental Organizations*,

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This project is one of "transformative imagining." It is an "imagining" because it begins with a meaning-layered and evocative phrase – *a compassionate sense of place*. It then seeks to speculate in a disciplined and empirically informed manner as to how this conceptual innovation can help transform contemporary socio-ecological relations. Re-imagining socio-ecological relations will involve a transformation of our understanding of the material world and our human place. Can a compassionate sense of place be such an imagining?

In particular, two assumptions drive this project:

- That "place" can be conceptualized in a way that acknowledges its experiential importance in human lives, and its utility for environmental activity, and be relevant in a world that is globally interconnected.
- That "compassion" can give meaningful direction for engagement in environmental social issues.

Following the two assumptions stated above, the papers in this dissertation orchestrate a coordinated probe of the following two research questions:

- What evidence is there of a place-conscious ethos of caring – a compassionate sense of place – among environmentalists?
- Can a compassionate sense of place serve as an environmentally effective logic of practice?

This dissertation consists of three interrelated papers and several chapters of supporting material. The dissertation fits the integrated article format, meaning that each of the papers in this dissertation is complete in itself and was intended to be independently publishable. Collectively they present an integrated exploration of the topic. Because of the paper-based format, a reader who reads the dissertation in its entirety may experience some repetition as conceptual foundations are re-explained. Each paper or chapter has its own references. Furthermore, because of that paper-based format, only that data and discussion relevant to the three papers is presented.

A reader should not expect a "thick description" of the entire field site. Nevertheless, although the intent was for these papers to be stylized and formatted for journal publication, the conventions expected for traditional dissertations maintained a presence. These papers are longer than journal articles in the attempt to present more data about the environmental field in the community of the study. Footnotes sprinkled throughout the papers extend the discussion even further. In some cases they point out further directions for research with the data collected for this project.

The project draws heavily on sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) "theory of practice" and his sociological tools. The concept of an ecological habitus is used in *The practice of environmentalism: Creating an ecological habitus* (Paper 1) to suggest how there can be such a disjoint between all the attention to the environment, the evidence of significant environmental degradation, and yet relatively little change or effort to improve the situation. *The practice of environmentalism* argues that the solution involves environmental social movements (ESMs) engaging in the development of an ecological habitus. *Habitus and cognitive praxis among environmentalists* (Paper 2) and *Caring for place? Possibilities for a compassionate sense of place among environmentalists* (Paper 3) are devoted to analysis of this process within the environmental organizations of one community, that of Thunder Bay, Ontario. A methodological interlude before Papers 2 and 3 explains the ethnographic orientation used in those two papers. The dissertation begins with *Education, social movements and environmental learning*, an analysis of education from the standpoint of educating for an ecologically oriented society.

Fertile Ground for the Research

In the introduction to a recent volume on environmental policy, Parson (2001) began by questioning whether incremental improvements or paradigmatic change are required to deal with environmental problems. He concludes the volume by pointing out the considerable barriers to environmental improvement due to current social, economic, political and psychological structures. Similarly, in *The Ingenuity Gap*, Thomas Homer-Dixon (2000) laid out the immense problems facing the world in terms of political instability, environmental scarcity, skyrocketing global poverty and material consumption, along with the slower paced capacity of human beings to marshal the ingenuity to create and implement new ideas to handle or solve the problems we

have created. Given this, can a new imaginary of the human relationship with the rest of the earth be constructed?

From long involvement as an environmental and peace educator, researcher and activist, my belief is that paradigmatic change is required and that education thus far has been woefully inadequate to the task. Studies and opinion polls show a generally high level of pro-environmental support. Yet there is little question that local environments and the global environment are changing at an increasing rate (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Somehow, there has been a disjoint between the environmental changes, the educative efforts, and the results. One leading environmental education (EE) journal recently devoted a special issue to this gap between environmental knowledge, environmental awareness, and pro-environmental behaviour ("Minding the Gap," *Environmental Education Research*, 8 (3), 2002). These details point to a need for a deeper, sociological analysis. In the classic formulation of C. Wright Mills (1959), where a problem shows a widespread pattern, it is a collective, public matter rather than an individualized one.

Scholarship that deconstructs existing social forms is important but insufficient. "Our analyses may be right as rain but they have little or no ability to move people about such a deeply resonant array of experiences as are implied in 'the relation to nature'" (Neil Smith, 1998, p. 280). More important is that new social forms be liberated during the deconstruction. This is often the task of social movements. As Lofland (1996) evocatively put it:

> In one sense, social movement organization beliefs stride out on the existential plains of the universe in daring to say that mainstream reality is not the only 'real' reality or that it is not 'really real.' Most often, this striding on those existential plains is not likely striding at all but timid tiptoeing, mild and cautious adversarial probing.... Nonetheless, some social movement organization Explorers do exuberantly bound into new universes of meaning.... pressing for cognitive possibilities [of alternative realities]. (p. 112)

This is a process of imagining – of alternatives and (so as not to be abstracted utopianism) of ways to get there. The work of social change is a process that is not rational and cognitive only.

When sociologists have examined environmental concerns they have typically done so in a manner that could be characterized as a "sociology of environmental issues." Sociologists have tended to study the social aspects of specific issues or the parameters and demographics of environmental attitudes. They have rarely applied a sociological consciousness to the taken-for-

granted social structures and modes of thought relative to consequences for the Earth's environment. Three decades ago, Catton and Dunlap (1978) charged mainstream sociology with a "human exemptionalist" mentality that limits the discipline's ability to discern the interplay between social and environmental issues. They concluded, as one of the authors has recently summarized,

> Mainstream sociology has developed a set of traditions and taken-for-granted assumptions that led our discipline to ignore the biophysical environment.... We also outlined an alternative paradigm... that highlighted the fact that even modern, industrial societies are dependent on their biophysical environments... (Dunlap, 2002, p. 330).

Nevertheless, environmental sociology remains a peripheral influence in the discipline (Dunlap, Buttel, Dickens & Gijswijt, 2002).

Human societies are grounded in the ecological, and to exempt humans from analysis in this context is faulty – as faulty as exempting gender or race or class from the analysis of social relations. Ignoring the environmental basis is to miss important foundations for social relations. Yet "the very idea of sociology as a separate disciplinary field is dependent upon the reification of a nature/culture dichotomy," Mick Smith (2001) maintains (p. 17). By this criticism, sociology is inherently anthropocentric. In an ecological context, humans do not inhabit places alone. Nor will sociology be able to meaningfully engage environmental degradation until it engages in a reflexive epistemic analysis of its own deeply held traditions (Meisenhelder, 1997, p. 170). Critiquing the field of education in a similar way led Bell and Russell (2000) to query, "What meanings and voices have been preempted by the virtually exclusive focus on humans and human language in a human-centred epistemological framework?" (p. 189). If prognostications of the future are even partially accurate, the environment will become a more significant part of social analysis simply because the physical world is profoundly changing.

Numerous other commentators on the current socio-environmental situation suggest that Western cultural ways of thinking about the environment and the human place on earth are at the centre of the problem. Deep ecology, social ecology, ecotheology, stewardship, ecofeminism and indigenous epistemology are among the ecophilosophical approaches trying to reformulate ways of thinking and being in recognition of eco-social interrelationships (see Hay, 2002 for an excellent overview of various strands). Although focusing on varying elements, each of these

approaches also describes the "exemptionalist" hubris derived from Western culture. Together, these philosophical approaches suggest that there has been a dominant exploitative and anthropocentric worldview, to which an ecologically oriented worldview is to be preferred. The former worldview has manifested itself in the social forms and institutions of "modernity" with considerable ecological impact (York, Rosa & Dietz, 2003).[1] Other elements of this dominant worldview include a reason-driven, techno-managerial orientation wherein the world is conceptualized as machine-like and teleologically inert, and a tendency for the natural world to be limited to instrumental valuation for human purpose such as resource utilization or aesthetic appreciation. Western epistemological traditions privilege abstracted and presumably universal facts and theories constructed as "knowledge" contrasted to local, traditional, experiential, or contextualized knowledge (Goonatilake, 2006). Critics argue that this epistemic orientation further contributes to human "alienation" from the rest of the earth (Bowers, 1993; Naess, 1989). Preston (2003) drew forth this argument, showing how the imaginary that is the mind detached from embodiment has dominated modernity. As he described it, "place" has been ignored in locating the processes and means of knowing. And although proponents of knowledge as situated have highlighted epistemological standpoints generated by social locations such race, gender, sexuality and class, the physical environment has been largely ignored.

The majority of social theory currently offers little direction or guidance in developing sound human-earth relationships (Smith, 2001). Critical social scientists have been adept at

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[1] Charles Taylor (2004), although not addressing ecological implications, calls the modern worldview the "modern social imaginary" and described how it has manifested itself in the development of the institutions of the market, the public sphere and civil society. Taylor, Gaonkar and the other scholars associated with the Center for Transcultural Studies struggled to describe the social imaginary. It is "an enabling but not fully explicable symbolic matrix within which a people imagine and act as world-making collective agents" (Gaonkar, 2002, p. 1); it is "ways of understanding the social that become social entities themselves, mediating collective life... embedded in the habitus of the population" (p. 4).

Gaonkar asserted, "It is only through the mediation of the imaginary that we are able to conceive of the real in the first-place" (p. 7). It is this view of imagination that I want to emphasize. The metaphor of "the social imaginary" replaces "social construction" for me, since the latter analogy conveys something of an orderly, planned, and rational process – we construct highways and buildings. But both metaphors emphasize that things could have been different – the renovations to the house, or the perturbations of our imagination have variants – an important precursor to facilitating social change. Without such a belief, the existing shape of society appears inevitable, reified, determined by history. The emancipatory thrust of sociology is that society can be liberated from determinism. Imagination is part of this process. See also the special issue of *Globalisation, Societies and Education* (Fahey & Kenway, 2006).

examining the diverse social, cultural, economic, political, and discursive conditions that marginalize on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, disability and other factors. But they have been less open to a political ecology that also links such conditions of oppression with the relatively voiceless earth. Referring to education generally and higher education specifically, the editor of the American journal *Educational Studies* observed,

> The institution is not open to supporting such an endeavor. Even those utilizing critical perspectives and working hard to get their students thinking about and responding to the structured relations between schooling and racism, sexism, homophobia, and poverty miss the boat when it comes to making clear connections between social injustice and the degradation of biodiversity in our communities and across the globe (Martusewicz, 2001, p. 395).

In contemporary North American society we have: high public support regarding various environmental measures; decades of considerable media attention about environmental issues; weak or nonexistent governmental and business responses; significant environmental change and degradation. The intersection of these trends is puzzling and contradictory. Even acknowledging that the pace of environmental change is slow and the consequences can be diluted by technological innovation or displacement, that most social theorists and the general public minimally attend to the fundamental challenges presented by burgeoning environmental problems appears peculiar. One way out of the puzzle, I suggest, and corroborated in this research, is a compassionate sense of place. I conceptualize this place-based ethos of care as "a field of care involving the intersection of self-awareness and attentiveness to the flourishing of socio-ecological relations."

Why a Compassionate Sense of Place?

Planting the Idea.

Nicky Duenkel's (1994) phenomenological study of eight consciously ecocentric wilderness guides resonated powerfully with my own experience. Her research showed how difficult it is to maintain that philosophy and a corresponding lifestyle in a society with a very different orientation and structure. The individuals described their slipping back toward the "separated and superior" attitudes of the dominant milieu. To use terms that will figure prominently in this dissertation (and which will be explained later), as a *cognitive* praxis (Eyerman

& Jamison, 1991), they bought the deep ecological worldview. The difficulty was maintaining this at the level of lifestyle *practice*. The social *field* mitigated against the possibility, enforcing an unecological *logic of practice*.

My own previous research – an in-depth, ethnographic study of a wilderness-based environmental education program and how the participating youth were using their experience to act and think about the environment in the months afterwards – was particularly illuminating (Haluza-DeLay, 1996, 1999a, 2001a). Despite what was an otherwise conventional, well-run, intensive experience, the youth adapted the experience to their existing social context and socio-cultural values, practices and beliefs such that they maintained little concern for the environment afterwards. They used the word "Civilization" to refer to all human objects, and in other ways maintain a very clear Human/Nature dichotomy (Haluza-DeLay, 1999a). Building their construction of "the environment" on "nature," and nature as unfamiliar, pristine and wilderness-like, the teens generally concluded, "No nature at home, so nothing here to care about" (Haluza-DeLay, 2001a). This research led me to conclude we needed a very different type of environmental education (Haluza-DeLay, 2001b). Furthermore, it was clear: being concerned about the environment was swimming against the tide of an unecological society.

As a result of this research, I began looking for more structurally-oriented theoretical grounds than the independent phenomenological, constructivist epistemology in which I had been trained as an experiential educator and researcher (Haluza-DeLay, 1996). But neither did I want to lose all the notion of agency by people. Although situated within a social context, the educational enterprise is mostly comprised of individuals combining their old and new knowledge. In a way, these socio-cultural paradigms are the mental "relations of ruling" (D. Smith, 1999). The desire then is to break such oppressive and environmentally malignant shackles. It was in this period that I encountered the sociological theories of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

Bourdieu described his sociological approach as trying to undermine some of the standard sociological dichotomies, such as objectivism-subjectivism, structure-agency, theory-practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, Reed-Danahay, 2005). In a recent analysis of the state of social theory, Camic and Gross (1998) listed Bourdieu as the exemplar of the project of "construction of general tools for use in empirical analysis" (p. 455). Camic and Gross asserted favourably that

Bourdieu, unlike others so engaged, "concentrates on a limited set of concepts: most famously, 'habitus'... and 'field'" (p. 456). Bourdieu (1998) himself explained that the concepts he uses should not be studied in themselves – he is not developing a grand theory of society – but are conceptual tools to be used in research. Appropriately for this dissertation, Bourdieu conceptualized society as space, both symbolically and substantively. He posited that actors negotiate within interlocking and multilayered social "fields" and that the field positions of actors create "habitus," or embodied but unconscious dispositions that generate a "logic of practice" or *sens pratique*, by which persons operate in the specific field. Habitus is a middle ground in the structure-agency tension, and seems to be particularly useful as a way of describing the challenges involved in routinizing environmentally aware lifestyles and social structures.

At the same time, I was interested in "place." Numerous educators have suggested a place-based focus would be particularly productive for environmental education (Elder, 1998; Gruenewald, 2003a, 2003b; Nabhan & Trimble, 1995; Orr, 1994; Sobel, 1998; Theobald, 1997; Traina & Darley Hill, 1995). Environmental scholars and activists also have argued for a place-based approach to political, social and economic valuation (Berry, 1972; Berthold-Bond, 2000; Greear, 2005; Kemmis, 1990; Norton & Hannon, 1997; Sauer, 1992) The basic argument of advocates of place-based environmental attention is that knowing one's place is a deeply experiential process that aids the individual and social group to develop knowledge and caring appropriate for the task of living well, that is, in a socially and environmentally conscious manner. Farmer-philosopher-poet Wendell Berry (1972) summarized this view: "Without a complex knowledge of one's place, and without the faithfulness to one's place on which such knowledge depends, it is inevitable that the place will be used carelessly, and eventually destroyed" (p. 44). Ideally, for such thinkers, effective place-based learning or place-based socio-political systems require long residence, or "rootedness" (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977).

While having intuitive appeal, such a conceptualization of place did not fit my personal history and seems unlikely or even luxurious in increasingly mobile societies in a globalizing world (Cuthbertson, Heine & Whitson, 1997). Community is weakened in these contexts or must be constructed differently than the traditional *gemeinschaft* of nostalgia (Young, 1990). Furthermore, it is unclear how a sense of place of a locale can "scale up" to the larger realms of

national or global, both of which are important sites of environmental and social policy-making (Aberley, 1993; Massey, 1997; Parson, 2001). However, the intuitive appeal of place-based environmentalism is worth following, albeit in a hard-nosed, disciplined and realistic inquiry.

Germinating the Concept.

The term "compassionate sense of place" was coined in mid 1995, during an offhand conversation over fair-trade coffee. Brent Cuthbertson said something to Mike Heine that included those words. I was not really paying attention until the phrase "a compassionate sense of place" leapt out from the coffee-shop hubbub – like that movie special effect where the camera burrows in to concentrate on the subject and everything around goes completely out of focus. There was depth of meaning in the term! It said a lot of what I was looking for, although I wasn't sure what the meanings were. It captured a number of things: that we humans are relational, embodied, corporeal beings embedded in our environments/places; it implied that a "sense" was important, rather than the overly cognitive emphasis of most education. It had something – compassion – that gave direction to this sense of place.

Since that time, the term has been used to describe variously the aims of outdoor education (Haluza-DeLay, 1999b), wilderness guiding (Cuthbertson, 1999; Haluza-DeLay & Cuthbertson, 2000), environmental education (DeLay, 2001b), and community development (Curthoys & Cuthbertson, 2001). Cuthbertson and Curthoys (2002) used a parallel of the deep-ecological formulation of Self to show how Place[2] is a site of signification and moral consideration. I have consciously applied the notion to built environments, that is, to "remystify the city" (Haluza-DeLay, 1997).

Cuthbertson and I considered the role of "compassion" to be essential, which might overcome some of the deficits of place-based environmental thought and education (Haluza-DeLay & Cuthbertson, 2000). We were careful to articulate "compassion" in line with historical moral traditions and not the more common connotation of "pity." We were also careful to consider place in ways that did not reify rootedness. Still, the concept has never had a decent

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[2] The capitalization is intentional, following Curthoys and Cuthbertson (2002).

treatment. The task of this dissertation is to imagine and examine this idea in the operations of environmentally active people within environmental organizations.

The dissertation does this through the papers that follow. First comes a review of *Education, social movements and environmental learning*. It concludes, following David Orr and C.A. Bowers, that other venues besides formal education may be more productive in internalizing environmental awareness into practice. It reviews experiential learning, place-based education, and social movements as sites of learning. Ultimately, the review shows the validity of investigating the internalisation of an environmental logic of practice, associated with involvement in environmental organizations. *The practice of environmentalism: Creating ecological habitus* (Paper 1) begins this process with explanation of Bourdieu's concepts, and a thorough, theoretical analysis of an "ecological habitus." *Habitus and cognitive praxis among environmentalists* (Paper 2) and *Caring for place? Possibilities for a compassionate sense of place among environmentalists* (Paper 3) are grounded in an ethnography of environmental involvement in the specific geographic region of Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada. An interlude preceding them explains in detail the ethnographic method used in these two papers. *Habitus and cognitive praxis among environmentalists* examines the dispositions of an environmentalist habitus and its relationship with cognitive praxis. *Caring for place?* interrogates "caring" and "place" within the environmental logic of practice generated by an ecological habitus. *Caught not taught: Growing a compassionate sense of place...* concludes the study with consideration of educative dimensions for this internalized *modus vivendi* and whether compassion can be sufficient to serve as an effective logic of practice. Together, these papers enable us to consider whether a compassionate sense of place functions in practice and can orient environmental concern for the production of more beneficial socio-ecological relations.

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