



Environmental Science Graduate Program Student Seminar Series

Meeting the Personal Environment: Exploring Environmental Sensitivity of Appalachian College Students



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Abstract

The Appalachian Ohio area is characterized as a politically conservative, rural region with an economy that is historically based on resource extraction. Individuals within these demographics have been traditionally supposed to display a lower degree of environmental concern relative to their urban, liberal counterparts. The region boasts many avenues for outdoor recreation and experience, found in some studies to positively affect environmental concern. Further, although the area evidences lower educational attainment when compared to the rest of the state, the pursuit of higher education might also serve as an influence on environmental concern, along with other social factors such as religion, politics, and social capital. Individuals who choose to pursue higher education through a community college may also provide important insight into effects of place and place attachment, which are also positively related to environmental concern in some studies.

A broad age-and-gender range of 11 students pursuing either an Environmental Science or Wildlife Conservation degree in a community college serving the Appalachian region participated in qualitative interviews following a phenomenological, co-constructivist framework. Participants responded to a series of discussion questions exploring place attachment, outdoor recreation and experience, educational experience, and religion, politics, and relationships within an environmental context.

Theoretical implications of this work include a better understanding of the way in which outdoor recreation / nature experience can influence environmental sensitivity (through incorporation of meanings supplied to places), as well as the role of higher education in the environmental sciences (via knowledge provision which can mitigate negative social effects). We see also that positive effects on environmental sensitivity are mediated by circumstantial constraints. Taken as a whole, these findings provide impetus to extend nature connection opportunities to a wider range of individuals and promote the beneficial outcomes of human well-being and wise management of common resources.