Exploring local residents’ community attachment regarding the impacts of tourism on urban parks

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Abstract

Within the majority of community research, a topic that continuously interests community scholars is community attachment, given its importance in communities. Researchers have examined community attachment with a major focus on the social relations. However, less often sociologists have considered the impacts of the physical-natural environment on community attachment with a few exceptions. While most work has focused on the physical environment in rural communities, no research to date has emphasized the natural amenities in urban areas and their effects on community attachment. Urban parks are a typical form of urban natural landscape having significant social, economic and ecological functions. Moreover, today, there is a growing recognition of urban parks’ attractiveness and roles in tourism. Tourists and local residents make use of many same facilities in urban parks for recreational and leisure purposes. Therefore, it seems pertinent to argue that tourists’ visitation to urban parks may affect the place and local park users. The purpose of this study is to examine how tourism influence locals’ interactions with the landscape of the park and further affect their community attachment.
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Introduction

Regardless the fact that defining the term ‘community’ has been and continues to be difficult, a large body of literature referring to as community studies exists in the social sciences (Theodori, 2000). Within the majority of community research, a topic that continuously interests community scholars is community attachment, given its importance in communities. Studies have reported that community attachment makes great contributions to individual well-being (Theodori, 2001), collective actions (Theodori, 2004), effective and positive tourism development (Um & Crompton, 1987; Harrill & Potts, 2003; Jurowski, 1998; McCool & Martin, 1994; Vesey & Dimanche, 2000; Williams et al., 1995), management of local ecosystems and natural lands (Clark & Stein, 2003), and promotion of environmentally friendly behaviors (Brehm, Eisenhauer & Krannich, 2006).

Community attachment reflects individuals’ emotional investment to their community with feelings of rootedness and belonging. Sociologists have long been interested in understanding the effects of differing social forms on the social and emotional bonds to a specific locality (Brehm, 2007). Historically, academics believed community, which was based on social connections, would decline with the emergence of urban society (Goudy, 1990; Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974). Researchers later continued to examine community attachment with a major focus on the social relations. For example, the systemic model developed by Kasarda and Janowitz (1974) posited a connection between community attachment and local social bonds. This model has been replicated and refined by many other researchers with primary concerns on the importance of social interactions in community attachment.

However, less often sociologists have considered the impacts of the physical-natural environment on community attachment with a few exceptions (Clark & Stein, 2003; Brehm et al., 2004, 2006; Matarrita-Cascante, Stedman & Luloff, 2010; Matarrita-Cascante, 2014). According to Brehm et al. (2004, 2006), besides the social interaction, the physical-natural environment is equally important in fostering community attachment. Yet, Brehm (2007) cautioned that while the physical-natural environment was an essential facet of community attachment, most often it intertwined with social interaction in participating activities in natural settings. (Brehm, 2007; Matarrita-Cascante, 2014). Accordingly, the distinction between social and natural-physical aspects contributing to community attachment is not clear that more work is needed to further examine the role that the physical-natural environment plays in community attachment (Matarrita-Cascante, 2014). Furthermore, while most work has focused on the physical environment in rural communities, no research to date has emphasized the natural amenities in urban areas and their effects on community attachment. Thus, to fill this literature gap, this study will specifically explore if urban parks, a typical from of urban natural landscape, contribute to residents’ community attachment. The primary research question of this study is: do urban parks contribute to residents’ community attachment to the local area and the process by which the attachment is formed?

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a predominant think tank in the United States, forecasts that worldwide about 60% of the population will live in cities by 2025, compared to 29% in 1950 (CSIS, 2003). Clearly, such population shift and urban expansion confined by physical and political boundaries lead to the decreasing space in per capita term and urgent requirement to address issues regarding green loss in urban settings (James et al., 2009). Consequently, building a green city is an ideal that has been universally appealing due to its capable of transcends divides in temporality, space and culture (Hestmark, 2000). According to many urban planners and landscape designers, introducing and preserving greenery is an indispensable requirement of urban infrastructure. As the socio-economic, environmental, emotional and psychological benefits that urban parks offer to urban communities have been widely recognized
it is argued, “a city generously endowed with high-quality greenery is a necessary gradient of environmental quality and quality of life” (Jim, 2002, p.128).

It has been firmly recognized by many researchers (e.g. Bradley 1995; Shafer 1999; Tyrvainen 2001; Lutz and Bastian 2002) that urban parks have significant social, economic and ecological functions. Reviewing 90 articles published during 1991 and 2006 in *Landscape and Urban Planning (LUP)*, Matsuoka and Kaplan (2008) found urban parks meet a wide range of human needs, referring to as nature needs and human-interaction needs. This indicates that urban parks are not only physical settings providing a variety of activities and recreational uses, but also they present the nature, culture and social communities. Thus, urban parks, a type of urban landscape encompassing both natural and social attributes, would make an important contribution to community attachment. Such community attachment can be fostered from park visitors’ functional interactions with the physical-natural landscape in urban parks through their engagement in recreational activities, their emotional interactions with the park landscape based on the place meanings and place attachment attributed to the park, as well as their social interactions with family, friends and/or other park users in the places.

Of particular investigation in the natural and social aspects of urban parks that nurture community attachment, tourism, an influential force that may reconfigure the landscape of urban parks and impact the patterns of social interactions within, should be included in the assessing model of attachment as well. According to Masberg and Jamieson (1999), the relationship between urban parks and tourism was neither well understood nor recorded, even though such relationship certainly existed. Archer (2006) summarized the roles of urban parks in the city’s tourism system from two perspectives: 1) “as stimulator of interest in travel to a specific destination as influence of tourist behavior at the destination” (p. 278), and 2) “as contributor to visitor satisfaction with the holiday destination experience” (p. 279).

Increasingly, many cities use parks as an “engine” to drive the tourism industry. Since the mid-1980s, there has been unprecedented growth in the number of festivals and events hosted in urban parks (Crompton, n.d.). One of the primary objectives that communities organize and promote these activities in parks was to attract tourists from outside of the community. In addition, it has been suggested that parks with aesthetical landscape design, zoos, museums, and cultural and heritage artifacts, recognized as “living works of art”, can be tourist attractions contributing to urban tourism development (Crompton, n.d.). As a result, many attractions locate in the parks and many parks themselves are attractions. This leads to a conclusion that modern urban parks provide diverse functions and services to a wide spectrum of audience including both local residents and tourists.

Clearly, tourists and local residents make use of many same facilities in urban parks for recreational and leisure purposes. Literature has demonstrated that tourism and accompanying tourists’ visit bring impacts to host communities and their inhabitants in the economic, social, cultural and environmental domains (e.g. Ap & Crompton, 1998; Chen, 2001; Haley, Snith & Miller, 2005; Lankford & Howard, 1994; Rollins, 1997). Therefore, it seems pertinent to argue that tourists’ visitation to urban parks may affect the place and local park users. To reach this study objective of examining the contribution of urban parks in fostering community attachment, tourism related factors will be added in the assessing model to examine how tourism influence locals’ interactions with the landscape of the park and further affect their community attachment.
Methods

The study area of this research is the Discovery Green Park in Houston, Texas. The Discovery Green is a 12-acre public park located in downtown Houston. Due to hundreds of free events and programs that attract a diverse audience, the Discovery Green Park has become a popular urban green space embracing feelings of safety, community, and family-friendliness. Increasingly, Discovery Green has served as a green village for the city, a source of health and happiness for citizens, the city’s go-to venue for large cultural festivals and mega events, and an exceptionally beautiful landscape in the heart of Houston (“Discovery Green”, n.d; Discovery Green Conservancy, 2013). Being located next to the George R. Brown Convention Center and the Hilton Americas Hotel, Discovery Green also attracts many visitors from outside of the town. The Greater Houston Convention and Visitor Bureau has listed Discovery Green as one of the city’s top attractions for urban green space, out-door recreation, and cultural and physical activities.

The study population of this research project will be the park users in the Discovery Green. In order to attain a representative sample of park users, interviews will be conducted on both weekdays and weekends at various times of the day, including peak-and off-hours. Interviews will be conducted in different spots around several park features that usually have the highest levels of use, such as The Gateway Fountain and McGovern Playground, and Jones Lawn and Brown Foundation Promenade. During each sampling period, people will be randomly approached and be first informed about this study’s objective and survey procedure. People who are willing to participate will be asked to leave an email address, and later a survey invitation will be sent to their email account. People who do not have email account or do not want to leave email address will be given a printed questionnaire with a pre-paid envelope to return the questionnaire. The questionnaire includes five sections, which takes respondents 10 to 15 minutes to finish.

Results

Most studies have examined the community attachment with a major focus on the social bonds established with other community members. To date, studies analyzing community attachment have largely ignored the influence of the physical-natural environment. Recently, a few studies (e.g. Brehm, et al., 2004, 2006; Brehm, 2007; Clark & Stein, 2003; Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2010) have expanded the concept of community attachment beyond the social dimensions by incorporating the natural landscape in assessing models. While most works in this vein have focused on the rural communities with rich natural amenity, research may be needed to examine the natural amenities in urban areas and their effects on community attachment as well. This study therefore will examine a different context of urban area, to explore the role that urban natural landscape plays in determining community attachment. The study results are expected to add our understandings of the role that physical-natural landscape plays in fostering residents’ community attachment. This study will further refine the assessment of community attachment through the measurement of three types of interactions between people and the urban park landscape: functional interaction, emotional interaction and social interaction. In addition, by examining the impacts of tourism and tourists’ visit on residents’ interactions with the physical-natural landscape in urban parks, the study results are expected to better explain the relationship between tourism development and local recreational use. From a practical perspective, the study results will help both urban planners and tourism developers in establishing more effective strategies guiding future urban park planning and management, and urban tourism development.
References


