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## Exploring the Memorable Places of Rock Climbing Tourists

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### ABSTRACT

*Rock climbers are attracted to destinations by the climbing sites found there. Given the centrality of these sites to travel behavior, the fundamental question guiding this research is “What is the nature of the relationship between rock climbers and the sites they climb?” with a focus on how places are infused with meaning. This poster uses the personal narratives of ten rock climbers from Western Canada to explore how these specific climbers are creating meaningful places through sport and travel.*

**Keywords:** *place meaning, rock climbing*

### INTRODUCTION

Active involvement in sport helps to build meaningful connections between visitors and destination places (Hinch and Higham 2004). The sport of rock climbing appears to provide a good illustration of this. Therefore the fundamental question guiding this research is “What is the nature of the relationship between rock climbers and the sites they climb?” with a focus on how places are infused with meaning. Climbers rate climbing areas according to traits like accessibility, climbing route types/numbers, social interactions, and scenery (Hanley, Write, and Koop 2002). More generally, the rich landscape descriptions found in the popular climbing literature indicate that climbing sites hold significant meaning to climbers.

### LITERATURE

Space is a location or area. In contrast, a place is a space infused with meanings. Place meaning is developed through experience and interactions with spatial elements that create emotions, connections, and identities of and within geographical locations (Tuan 1975). Such meanings can be acquired through recreation (e.g., Kruger 2006), sport (e.g., Bale and Vertinsky 2004) and tourism pursuits (Crouch 2000). Fishwick and Vining (1992) found “...recreation places are sensed as a combination of setting, landscape, ritual, routine, people, personal experiences and in the context of other places” (p. 61). Similarly, Standeven and de Knop (1998) described “sport as a cultural experience of physical activity; [and] tourism as a cultural

experience of place” (p. 58). By extension, sport based cultural experiences may be a significant way in which destinations are infused with meaning.

“Tourism places are often created as enclaves devoted to recreation and...leisure experience. They exist physically...as well as mentally...” (Lew 2004, p.1). They have both a physical presence and a cognitive/emotional one. It is the relationship between these physical sites and the cognitive/emotional experiences of climbers that is the focus of this poster. Insight into this relationship is important because sport tourism is “...a social, economic and cultural phenomenon that arises from the unique interaction of activity, people and place” (Weed and Bull 2004, p. xiv). As such, the way that climbers experience place has a bearing on not only the immediate domain of the relationship between climbing, climbers and the sites that they climb, but also on the social, economic, cultural and indeed the environmental contexts in which this interaction occurs. It therefore has a bearing on sustainability.

Developing a better understanding of the sport tourism experience as it relates to place will help explain the behaviors of sport tourists while they travel to participate in their activities (Weed 2008). This is especially relevant in the case of rock climbers as they increasingly pursue their sport in sites that include purpose built facilities, local crags, and far-off destinations.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Insight into the place based experience of these climbers was gained by asking climbers to describe their most memorable rock climbing trip experiences. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to allow participants to share their thoughts and experiences about rock climbing trips through personal narratives. Given the nature of these narratives, ten interviews were sufficient to provide substantial insight into the place meaning that these particular climbers developed. Study participants identified themselves as spending a substantial amount of their leisure time rock climbing. They were contacted through snowball sampling (i.e., climbing community contacts) and through posters displayed at indoor climbing facilities and rock climbing focused retailers in Western Canada. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and subjected to inductive coding to identify themes that provided insights into the participants’ experiences with climbing places (Patton, 2002). Coding became more deductive as analysis of the transcripts progressed. Sensitizing concepts that focused on the place experience of rock climbing provided a frame of reference for the analysis of the transcripts (Schwandt, 2000; Patton, 2002).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Eleven place and tourism themes emerged from the analysis. Three of these themes that were particularly relevant to understanding how spaces acquire meaning, why people travel to climb and how they experience climbing places are discussed. These include: 1) emotional experience, 2) learned experience, and 3) the novelty of the place.

The **emotional experience theme** emerged as two distinct perspectives: one based on positive experience and the other based on negative experience. Positive experience included feelings of significant accomplishments, ideal weather, appealing scenery and exceptional holistic trip experiences. For example, participant 3 reported “I fell over and over and over but then eventually made it to the top and getting to the top, that was super memorable partly cause of the view was amazing and partly just cause I didn’t think it was going to happen.” In contrast, participant 6 describes her negative experience by recounting that, “...it was cold and we were at the boulder, the Rock Gardens in Jasper and it doesn’t get any sun so it was really really cold. And so my hands were numb my toes were numb and, [my boyfriend] put up a route I just couldn’t ... do it because I was freezing...”. Emotional experience tends to mark a climbing place.

The **learned experience theme** included dimensions related to climbing mentors, skill acquisition and increased self awareness. Reflecting on her trip to Squamish, B.C. and planning for a return trip, participant 4 explained “I think I would go and probably [be] a bit more prepared. [It] would be nice you know, [to] kind of scout it a little bit - what rocks I’m going to do, level of difficulties - so I’m not just trying stuff out of my league.” The learning experience influenced how the climber viewed their experience and the meaning that they attached to this place.

A **novelty theme** highlighted the climbers’ interest in having new experiences. Climbers identified unique experiences, things that were new and/or different from what they usually encountered, as reflected in statements beginning with “I’ve never...”. Participant 4 recalled, “...when I was 18 I went to Squamish for a week and did bouldering. That was really fun, that was, just out of high school. First time I had ever gone climbing just with another girlfriend, like before that my parents were pretty hesitant to let me go out on my own, [laughs] so. And it was the total hippy trip, we bussed it out, we camped, we hitchhiked into town to buy food. It was a lot of fun.” Similarly, in describing his most memorable trip experience to Bishop, California, participant 10 exclaimed, “...we were just so excited and you step out of the car and you’re in another world.” Later he emphasized the joy of being able to climb outside in January, “...it was a very welcome awesomeness that was so definitely a change from a minus whatever it was when we left.” These climbers were, in essence, collecting new meaningful experiences and specific climbing places.

## CONCLUSION

The climbing sites which can be viewed as spaces with various natural features became places infused with meaning based on the memorable experiences of the climbers during their travels. Through the expressed personal narratives of the most memorable trip experiences of ten rock climbers in Western Canada, three particularly relevant themes emerged. The bonds between these rock climbers and the places that they visited during their rock climbing travels were fostered by experiences characterized by emotion (both positive and negative), learning, and novelty. These findings help to confirm that in the pursuit of their climbing passions,

climbers infuse climbing sites with meanings and thereby develop significant bonds to place. Such bonds will influence subsequent trip making decisions. The growth of climbing presents an interesting development in this area that merits further investigation in terms of the relationship between climbing, place and the inclination of climbers to travel. Specifically, more insight is needed on the place attachment of climbers in all climbing sites. Such insight has implications for the travel patterns of these sport tourists and the sustainability of existing climbing destinations.

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