

Environmental Values, the Coastal Context, and a Sense of Place

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This paper will explore the importance of the coastal environment as a critical source of geographic, ecological and cultural sense of place for many people. It will explore Simone Weil's contention that a secure sense of place is among "the most important and least recognized needs of the human soul." Despite the many critical benefits associated with this need for place, particularly in the coastal zone, this paper will cite various trends in modern society that appear to be seriously eroding and degrading these emotional and environmental needs.

The political scientist, David Orr, suggested we must find "the will to rediscover and reinhabit our places and regions, finding in them sources of food, livelihood, healing, recreation, and celebration." Orr, in effect, hypothesized that a secure and sustained sense of place is vital to our affective, intellectual and physical well-being.

A typology of environmental values is employed to elucidate these benefits derived from a secure sense of place in the coastal context. These include aesthetic, dominionistic, ecological, humanistic, moralistic, naturalistic, symbolic, utilitarian and negativistic values. This paper will contend that the meaningful experience of these diverse environmental values associated with the coastal environment cannot be effectively obtained in the absence of a secure and sustained relationship with this habitat. Unfortunately, trends including congestion, overpopulation, ecological degradation, pollution, habitat loss, declining biodiversity, the erosion of stable communities, increasing limitations on access, and the decline of regional economies in modern society have seriously compromised the capacity of coastal zones to maintain these environmental values in relation to a secure sense of place. These ominous tendencies represent a significant threat not only to human material well-being, but also to the emotional, intellectual, and even ethical and spiritual needs of the human animal.