Sense of Place and Environmental Sustainability in Sport

Brian P. McCullough, Seattle University
Timothy Kellison, Georgia State University

The United National Environmental Programme (UNEP) (2010) cautions sport managers who are trying to reduce their organization’s impact that it is arduous to control, or even mitigate, the behaviors and the resultant environmental impacts of sport spectators (i.e., fans). Despite the challenges presented by the UNEP, sport organizations are developing strategies and campaigns to increase sustainable behaviors among their sport fans (Kellison & Kim, 2014; Pfahl, 2011). For example, Casper and colleagues (2014) note that sport organizations use green games as a mechanism to engage fans and educate them on sustainable behaviors while attending sporting events and in their everyday lives. One limitation, however, is that green games are a temporary and one-time engagement, oftentimes featured once a season, are used to promote sustainability initiatives of sponsors, and do not result in repetitive messaging that have been shown to increase sustainable behaviors among sport fans through the likes of other marketing and communication efforts (Worrell & Reuter, 2014). Further, a sporting event may not be the best forum to engage or educate fans on sustainability issues due to the salient and dominate nature of fan identification (see Branscombe & Wann, 1992; Cialdini, et al., 1976) and the dormancy of the fan’s environmental identity (Stern, 2000), a phenomenon known as identity salience hierarchy (Stryker & Serpe, 1982).

Considering the challenges of salient identity hierarchy, McCullough (2013) notes that sport organizations can leverage one of their most valuable assets, fans’ affiliation to their team’s brand, to increase fans’ sustainable behaviors. That is, the loyalty fans have to their sport team (i.e., brand) result in an unmatched bond that sport organizations can leverage to induce fans to increase their sustainable behaviors (e.g., recycle, compost, etc). However, many sport organizations do not properly harness and use their fans’ loyalty and identity with the team effectively or advantageously to benefit the sport organization (e.g., environmental sustainability) (Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). To this end, the purpose of this presentation is to propose a conceptual framework demonstrating how sense of place (SOP), manifested through fan identification, can activate the environmental identity in fans to increase sustainable behaviors.

Fan identification and SOP are related due to their social and integral part in forming an individual’s identity and sense of purpose. Further, previous research concerning SOP has demonstrated that the concepts can be used to promote sustainable behaviors in the areas of tourism, recreation and sport (Farnum, Hall, & Kruger, 2005; Han, Nelson, & Kim, in press; Korpela, 1989). Sport fans identify with the various aspects that make up the sport organization’s brand, which include players, coaches, facilities, logos/insignia, traditions, and language. Underwood and colleagues (2001) specifically recognize the role of a sport organization’s stadium (i.e., physical facility) in the formation of the fan game day experience: “The intimate relationship between facility and fan is illustrated by the fact that many of these stadiums/arenas are referred to by more familiar nicknames” (Underwood et al., 2001 p. 7). They continue to note that sport organizations tend to focus on the team and facility aspects of the brand rather than individual players, because players are more likely to come and go. Thus, sport organizations can create a shared group experience by leveraging the connections fans have with the sport facility through integrated communications on the facility’s brand elements.

The concept of SOP has been integrated with multiple disciplines including recreation, tourism, and sport management and marketing (Funk & James, 2006; Gammon, 2004; Meyer, 2001). SOP is used interchangeably with other conceptualizations like place identity (Ramshaw & Hinch, 2006), place dependence (Stokols & Schumaker, 1981), and place attachment (Low & Altman, 1992). The conceptualization of SOP “involves an interplay of affect and emotions, knowledge and beliefs, and behaviors and actions” (Kyle, Graefe, & Manning, 2005, p. 155). This attachment is manifested through our human experience with a particular setting or space (e.g., college campus, stadium) and bestows that space value (Milligan, 1998).
Consistent with Jorgensen and Stedman (2001) we conceptualize SOP through three variables – place attachment, place identity, and place dependence. Place attachment is more temporal than the other two concepts. Place attachment focuses on the temporal orientation to a specific place as a result of an individual’s experience and interactions (e.g., personal and social). Place identity describes how the location helps fans form their own self-concepts through their individualization. Place dependence outlines individuals’ preferences to express their identity in a specific location over others. In this case, their integration into a broader community in a specific location is necessary to fulfill their identity. Gibson and colleagues demonstrate SOP among college football fans. They found “that a collegiate football team provided individuals an opportunity to express an identity (individuation) and a sense of belongingness (integration) on football Saturdays throughout the season (temporal orientation)” (cf. Funk & James, 2006, p. 196). Further, SOP has also been demonstrated to promote and influence sustainable behaviors (Uzzell, Pol, & Badenas, 2002; Vaske & Kobrin, 2001). Based on this previous research and its connection to fan identification, SOP should be leveraged as a way to promote sustainable behaviors among sport fans.

Sport management and sustainability researchers can use the following conceptual model to demonstrate the influence of fan identification on the relation of sense of place on sport fans’ sustainable behaviors at home sporting events. In the conceptual model three antecedent variables (i.e., place attachment, place identity, place dependence) provide cognitive, affective, and sociological tenets to empirically determine SOP (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2011). As the model progresses, SOP then predicts sustainable behaviors (Vaske & Kobrin, 2001; Uzzell et al., 2002). The relation between SOP has also been demonstrated to predict sustainable behaviors among sport fans (Han et al., in press). However, Han and colleagues did not evaluate the relation of psychographics (i.e., fan identification) of their participants on fans’ sustainable behaviors. Building on this previous work we propose that fan identification serves as a moderating variable that positively affects the strength of the relation between SOP and sustainable behaviors of fans attending a sporting event. Fan identification has been shown to moderate other behavioral outcomes (Ngan, Prendergast, & Tsang, 2011; Normal, Clark, & Walker, 2005; Theodorakis, Koustelios, Robinson, & Barlas, 2009).

This model can be used to create marketing campaigns that leverage fans’ sense of place surrounding their experiences when attending a sporting event. As part of the presentation, we will outline practical examples highlighting the various ways sense of place and fan identification can be used in sustainability campaigns involving sport organizations. Additional discussion and opportunities for new research will also be included.