



Conserving nostalgia: exploring private land protection patterns

Alana N. Seaman¹ · James R. Farmer² · H. Charles Chancellor³ · Agnes Sirima⁴

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Abstract

The dramatic loss of open space in the USA over the last 50 years has led to increased conservation efforts by public, private, and non-profit entities. Amongst private landowners, conservation easements, or conditions written into a property's title that permanently limit how it may be used, are a popular form of land protection. Private land protection is vital for both the conservation of America's characteristic open spaces, and to ensure the future of many threatened and endangered plant and animal species. Yet little is known about the people who are placing conservation easements on their properties, the landscape features and land use practices currently being protected under conservation easements, or the ways in which these conservation patterns will continue into the future. Regardless, private land conservation efforts are shaping the American landscape; therefore, a thorough understanding of their characteristics is needed. Given that nostalgia, or an idealized and simplified notion of the past, underlies many of the motivations private landowners have for protecting their properties, this study suggests that there is a link between the type of nostalgia motivating private land protection and the types of land and land use practices being conserved. Further, the authors contend that this phenomenon is worthy of further investigation given its potential for environmental, social, and economic impact.

Keywords Private land conservation · Land donation · Nostalgia · Land protection · Conservation easements

Introduction

Sweeping vistas of grand granite mountain ranges, wind-swept deserts, untouched rugged coastlines, and great agricultural plains characterize popular images of America's geography. Yet, development of open space in the USA has increased dramatically in recent history (Ernest and Wallace 2008; Tyler et al. 2009). Reports on land use by the U.S. Department of Agriculture indicate "urban land acreage

quadrupled from 1945 to 2007, increasing at about twice the rate of population growth over this period" (USDA 2007). As urban sprawl has encroached upon wild and rural landscapes, a number of conservation efforts have been undertaken by various public and private entities in order to ensure that open spaces remain a part of the American landscape for eternity. Amongst private landowners, conservation easements have become a popular form of land protection. Conservation easements are conditions written into a property's title that permanently limit how it may be used. As of 2015, almost 17 million acres of land in the USA was being protected under conservation easements (Land Trust Alliance 2017). However, "there is no one-size-fits-all conservation easement;" rather, "each one is individually tailored to meet conservation objectives and the needs of the landowner." (The Nature Conservancy n.d.; see also Cheever 1996). Thus, a myriad of property types are protected and property use activities allowed. Though, to date, little information is available about either the geographic features protected by, or land use patterns resulting from, these conservation efforts, making it virtually impossible to predict how private land conservation will continue to shape the American landscape into the future.

✉ Alana N. Seaman
SeamanA@uncw.edu

¹ Department of Recreation, Sports Leadership, & Tourism Management, School of Health & Applied Human Sciences, University of North Carolina Wilmington, 601 S. College Road, CB 5956, Wilmington, NC 28403, USA

² Department of Recreation, Park, & Tourism Studies, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA

³ Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management, Clemson University, Clemson, SC, USA

⁴ Department of Wildlife Management, Sokoine University of Agriculture, Morogoro, Tanzania

In addition to preserving the country's iconic wide-open landscapes (Cheever 1996), conservation biologists contend that private land protection is also vital to the sustainability of many plant and animal species. Morrisette (2001), for instance, contends that as many as *half* of all endangered species in the USA live entirely on private lands, and points out that “few ecosystems today exist solely on public lands” (p. 374). The U.S. Department of Agriculture in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service reports that upwards of 75% of all threatened and endangered species live either partially or entirely on private lands (USFWS n.d.). Others argue that an understanding of what is being conserved, by whom, in terms of private land is necessary so that conservation biologists may begin to “identify the biological resources likely to be conserved and those likely to be left unprotected through easements” (Merenlender et al. 2002, p. 65). They call for interdisciplinary research that might help to clarify which private lands are currently being conserved and which may be conserved in the future (Merenlender et al. 2002; see also Kiesecker et al. 2007).

In contrast to private land protection, public land conservation patterns have been widely considered. Nostalgic images of the landscape depicted by artists, photographers, and authors, that highlighted aesthetically pleasing aspects of the country's geography, simplified and romanticized agrarian ways of life, and mythicized whole regions of the USA are credited with fueling the American public's upswing in interest about the country's distinctive open landscapes, in turn ultimately sparking the conservation movement and leading to the creation of the National Parks (Byerly 1996; Graf 1993; Merchant 2007; Runte 1997; Strohmeier 1997; Wilson 1992; see also Lowenthal 1998). Similarly, nostalgia appears to underlie many of the motivations for private land protection motivation as well, and has recently been found to be an outright motivator for placing conservation easements on private properties as well (Halfacre 2015). Yet little is known about how these factors *guide* conservation efforts and ultimately work to shape the land. Thus, the impacts of nostalgia on private land protection are ripe for examination.

This small exploratory study investigates how various manifestations of nostalgia, as a factor motivating private land protection, influenced which features of their property landowners chose to protect. Findings suggest that links exist between the types of nostalgia motivating private land protection and the types of land protected and land use activities permitted under conservation easements. While this study represents a starting point, the authors contend that the subject is worthy of further investigation given its potential for ecological, social, and economic impact.

Literature review

Nostalgia

Nostalgia is perhaps most often associated with the bittersweet feelings that come with both missing the past and idealizing days gone by (Holak and Havlena 1998). The term was traditionally used to describe the homesickness experienced by soldiers and expats who, unable to return immediately to their motherlands, were incapacitated by feelings of grief brought on by an incurable longing for the home of their memories (Boym in Halfacre 2015). While contemporary scholars still largely agree that nostalgia is an emotional reaction to a longing for a particular mental image of the past wherein the negative aspects of history have been minimized and the complexities of everyday life simplified, they no longer deem the affliction a terminal disease (Goulding 2002; Holak and Havlena 1998; Holbrook 1993). Rather, feelings of nostalgia are thought to surface in the wake of social and physical transformation, wherein sufferers perceive themselves as victims of violent change (Lowenthal 1985; Lowenthal 1998). The rapid modernization and industrialization of Western countries from the 1960s through the 2000s, for example, is what Timothy (2011) argues has caused contemporary society's current obsession with nostalgia. He explains that “protecting the past is modern society's way of coping with an unstable present” wherein the material remainders of the past “provide stability in an unstable world,” and in the face of an uncertain future (Timothy 2011, p. 198; see also Lowenthal 1985; Schama 1996).

Though the subjective nature of nostalgia makes it an elusive concept to fully define, it is often characterized by an underlying belief that there was something inherently superior about the past (Halfacre 2015; Lowenthal 1998; Timothy 2011). Idealizing the days of yore allows the past to be seen as a safer, simpler place where rural culture thrived and life was good (Timothy 2011). Thus, nostalgia often centers on the notion that the agricultural-based life of traditional societies was idyllic, wholesome, and more authentic than the modern city life that most of us live today. In turn, scholars contend that nostalgia is fueled both by personal lived memories (Davis 1979) and impressions of other historic eras recalled through collective memories and images referenced in popular culture (Holbrook 1993; Lowenthal 1998). In this sense, scholars also argue that nostalgia can be both individually experienced and/or collectively experienced wherein shared feelings of nostalgia act as a bonding agent that helps to improve group solidarity and feelings of membership (Goulding 2002). Regardless however of whether nostalgia is crafted from fond memories of one's own childhood (Timothy 2011), or supplemented with wistful popular notions of yesteryear, it is typically seen as a generally positive experience that brings with it the poignant reminder that the past can

never be recaptured and the momentum of time can never be stopped (Holak and Havlena 1998).

Just as nostalgia is hard to define, it is also hard to predict. Davis (1979) for instance, contends that nostalgia is mostly likely to affect people as they reach middle age, provoking them to reminisce about things experienced during ones adolescence years. Others, however, disagree, arguing that age has no bearing on an individual's experiences of nostalgia (Holbrook 1993).

Public land conservation and nostalgia

Works of art, literature, photography, and cinema are widely credited with creating the simplified and idealized notion of America's wild and pastoral landscapes (see Blair 1998; Bruckner and Hsu 2007; Hsu 2005; Merchant 2007; Ryden 1999; Wilson 1992), and impressing upon the public the idea that the country's rapid development was eating away at pristine natural landscape where all species live in harmony and the human spirit could be renewed (Merchant 2007). Scholars contend that conservation efforts in New York's Hudson River Valley, for instance, have been driven in part by the lasting imagery created by early artists in the area. Graf (1993) explains that artists of the famed nineteenth century Hudson River School, whose romanticized paintings of the scenic waterway and neighboring Catskill Mountains were immensely popular, forged an idealized image of the area in the minds of the American public. When these artists began to depict the "environmental damage from river mismanagement, showing water pollution and forest destruction" in their paintings, people took note (p. 12). In turn, concern over the conservation of the river permeated public consciousness.

John Muir's writings about nature are considered equally influential in sparking America's conservation movement, an era of social concern over the country's wilderness resources that started in the late 1800s and led to the creation of the National Parks (Frost and Hall 2009; Oravec 1981). Similarly, Spaulding (1998) contends that Ansel Adams' photography, which conveyed "an idealization of the American landscape, not as a place of exploitive conquest and violence, but as a place of spiritual union between human society and an embracing nature," was influential in changing the way the American public viewed the country's wilderness during the early part of the last century (p. xiii). Adam's photographs (like many literary works of the day), he argues, helped lay the foundation for the public's concern over the development of open spaces in the national landscape and fueled public support for the National Park System. Likewise, Runte (1997) and Byerly (1996) contend that the literary works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and their contemporaries, which "fostered an appreciation of landscapes on an intellectual plane," were similarly influential in the

American public's acceptance of the National Park System (Runte 1997 p. 12; see also Merchant 2007).

Yosemite, however (America's first National Park), was not necessarily an *example* of wilderness in the USA; rather, it was a *symbol* of what the public pictured as America's wild landscape—dramatic, pristine, and beautiful, and therefore worthy of protection (Byerly 1996). Images of nature as the Garden of Eden and a place of renewal also fueled the preservation of places like Yosemite (Schama 1996). As such, what is preserved by the National Parks is based largely on aesthetic value—landscapes reflecting the picturesque natural elements showcased in artistic renderings of last century, and places where the public can come to enjoy nature. Their creation is *not* necessarily based on the needs of any specific species, ecosystems, watersheds, or other environmental concerns (Byerly 1996). To this day, the National Park System's mission is to preserve natural and cultural resources primarily "for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations;" thus, placing the public's enjoyment as a leading land use priority (National Park Service 2017). Byerly (1996) points out that this aesthetic view of the wilderness that is part of the picturesque legacy has had a crucial effect on public land management policies. It has taught us to value nature, but the criterion for evaluation is the quality for evaluation is the quality of aesthetic experience a landscape provides. The aestheticization of landscape permits the view to define and control the scene, yet fosters the illusion that the scene is part of self-regulating nature (p. 54).

Though vague, this institutionalized approach to land conservation at least gives the public, conservation biologists, and other conservation organizations some picture of what types of lands are likely to be conserved, and allows them to respond accordingly.

Private land protection

The same cannot be said for private land conservation. Instead, much of the research on private land conservation has focused primarily on understanding the reasons for pursuing protection. Above all, research indicates that the factors underlying landowners' decisions to protect their land are complex and varied, with some factors having a greater influence than others. The landowner's age and the nature of the farming being practiced, for instance, are both elements that may deter a landowner from placing a conservation easement on his or her property. Drost et al. (1996) found that older individuals were more reluctant to protect their land under conservation easements because the benefits of doing so were not necessarily tangible. Similarly, Kabii and Horwitz (2006) found that many full-time farmers were skeptical of the land use restrictions that would result from placing a conservation easement on their property, as they were concerned that restrictive covenants would limit their ability to profit from their

land. Other older individuals were simply not worried about protecting their ancestral farm lands because they trusted that their children and other family members would be successful in dealing with conservation threats in the future as they had in the past (Kabii and Horwitz 2006).

In addition to a fear over the loss of flexibility of land use due to tight restrictions associated with protecting land under a conservation easement, many individuals also cited high costs related to completing the easement transaction process, less than expected tax benefits, complexity of management options, reduction of actual property values, and the absence of support infrastructure as factors that had originally dissuaded them from pursuing conservation protection (McLaughlin 2004; Merenlender et al. 2002). However, once ensured that easement arrangements could be made which guaranteed that their long-term livelihoods would be secure, many landowners viewed conservation easements favorably.

In contrast to the few factors deterring individuals from placing conservation easements on their properties, scholars contend that there are a number of reasons why landowners do choose to pursue land protection through conservation easements. Rilla et al. (2000), for instance, found that some property owners were motivated by short-term factors such as financial incentives that could be quickly realized. Income tax credits given due to the decreased property values that result from placing land use restrictions on a parcel are the most common form of economic benefit associated with conservation easement adoption. Many landowners use these tax credits to offset their tax liability or to pay debt, while others transfer the credits to other taxpayers for a variety of reasons (Rilla et al. 2000). The economic benefits of placing a conservation easement on a piece of property has been used as means of accomplishing certain farming objectives as well as a way in which to fund both the retirement and savings accounts of the current landowners (Sokolow 2002). However, while scholars widely recognize that monetary incentives are somewhat influential in most property owners' decision to place conservation easements on their lands, they contend that such extrinsic factors are often secondary to other personal factors that motivate land protection (Farmer et al. 2011a, b; Ochterski 1996; Stern 1993; see also Deci 1975).

Stern (1993), for example, argues that people often choose to donate or sell their property to land trusts or place conservation easements on their parcels because they are concerned about the biosphere (stewardship), they care about others (altruism), or they do so for their own beliefs and satisfaction (selfish). Similarly, Ochterski (1996) argues that landowners are motivated to accept conservation easements because of factors such as personal commitment, conservation stewardship and landscape values, family history, and, lastly, financial incentives. Thus, the intrinsic motivations that emerge from within an individual, and are not easily manipulated by external stimuli (Deci 1975), are seen as the most influential factors

impacting a person's choice to pursue land protection efforts (see also Rilla et al. 2000).

Personal commitment, as a motivating factor, involves both the personal attachment one may feel towards a specific piece or particular type of land, and an individual's desire to leave behind a legacy for future generations (Feinberg 1997). In this case, personal connections are often derived from an individual's understanding of the importance of nature, as well as an individual's appreciation of a particular place or landscape cultivated from years of personal land ownership. A strong personal connection to particular pieces or types of land is often also strengthened by not knowing the actions of subsequent property owners, which in turn, motivates many individuals to pursue land protection and conservation efforts (Feinberg 1997).

Personal attachment to a piece of land may also be influenced by a long history of family ownership. In this sense, many property owners believe that protecting their land from any future development or fragmentation will ensure that the family ties are kept intact for future generations (Rilla et al. 2000). This may be especially true regarding family farms as many farmers have an ancestral history connected to their property that becomes part of the family's heritage. Thus, placing an easement on a family's farmland protects the property from development and preserves the family legacy. Sokolow (2002) argues that, in turn, family connections often motivate donors to facilitate the intergenerational transfer of properties. In line with the notion of keeping a family legacy alive, Rilla et al. (2000) found that the ability to continue farming on their properties was the main reason why many landowners in Massachusetts chose to forego their development rights (Rilla et al. 2000).

For many property owners, the idea that a parcel of land could be protected for perpetuity was both highly influential and integral to their decision to both place conservation easements on, and to give up development rights to their properties (Rilla et al. 2000). In this sense, conservation easements are seen as a way to guarantee that the property will continue to be used in a manner in line with the way the current owner values it (Kabii and Horwitz 2006). This notion of land protection often results in the desire to protect open spaces, conserve habitat for wild animals, and secure agricultural farms and traditional ways of life (Farmer et al. 2011a).

Most recently, Halfacre (2015) found that *nostalgia* was a motivating factor in many property owners' decisions to protect land in the South Carolina Lowcountry. Nostalgia, she contends, encompasses aspects of other motivating factors including place attachment, legacy, tradition, and the value of rural life, as well as the notion that in the past, the landscape was largely untouched and therefore pristine. Though these selective and mythic memories may distort the past, they are often a catalyst, she claims, for both land and cultural conservation and restoration. Yet the notion of nostalgia in relationship to land protection specifically has received little attention from the academic community (Halfacre 2015).

Conservation easements explained

Conservation easements are binding legal contracts wherein landowners agree, in perpetuity, to development restrictions placed upon their land in order to preserve particular features of their property (Farmer et al. 2011a; Land Trust Alliance 2017). Landowners may keep, sell, or will their properties to other owners, though conservation easements remain intact regardless of ownership. As a result, economic benefits in the form of property tax reductions may be derived. One national conservation organization explains, “by removing the land’s development potential, the easement lowers its market value, which in turn lowers estate tax” (Land Trust Alliance 2017).

Land trusts are non-profit organizations that both own (when acquired through donations and fee simple purchases) and monitor properties protected by conservation easements (Ernest and Wallace 2008; Farmer et al. 2011a; Land Trust Alliance 2017). To ensure that a parcel remains in compliance with the restrictions set forth in a conservation easement, land trust volunteers visit the property on a regular basis (usually annually or semi-annually). As of 2015, land trusts were credited with protecting over 56 million acres of land in the USA. In addition to taking on the responsibility of ensuring that the restrictions set forth in conservation easements are complied with, land trust organizations also work to educate the public about conservation, as well as advocate for the protection of open spaces.

Methods

For this small, but highly focused study, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the experiences landowners had when placing a conservation easement on their properties. A purposeful sampling technique was used wherein participants were chosen based on the depth and quality of information they were anticipated to provide (see Babbie 2014). Participants were selected from landowners in the Great Lakes Region of the USA who had previously completed a mailed survey about the placement of a conservation easement and had indicated on the final question of the survey that they would be willing to participate in a follow-up telephone call. Out of 32 survey participants who indicated their willingness to participate, 14 were reached for questioning. Thus, there were 14 participants in this study.

The interviews were digitally recorded with participant permission and the researchers also took field notes during the interview process. Interviews ranged in time from 17 to 48 min. Participants were asked a range of questions about their experiences placing a conservation easement on their property, working with local land trusts, and their involvement with other private land conservation efforts. The interview script was developed with broader

questions asked initially, becoming more focused as the interview progressed. In addition to basic demographic data, participants were asked to describe what motivated them to first consider private land conservation, what factors affected their decision and motivated them to place a conservation easement on their property, whether financial incentives had any impact on their decision to place a conservation easement, what types of land they had chosen to conserve, which restrictions were included in their conservation easement restrictions, and what types of activities they participated in on the land.

A three-step phenomenological data analysis approach was employed following Creswell (2007). First, data was collected and reviewed consistent with Moustakas’ (1994) framework for phenomenological coding wherein concepts, terms, and participant phrases were sorted into initial categories. The clusters of data were then analyzed, compared, and contrasted to one another allowing themes to emerge. The emergent themes and phrases contained within the data were then evaluated in conjunction with the original transcription in order to validate the observed phenomena. Finally, two researchers evaluated the phrases, categories, and themes, examining them for internal consistency. This included the review and crosschecking of the data between the two researchers, establishing a consensus on the coded data and emergent themes. Similar to interpretive biographers, phenomenology views verification and standards as largely related to the researchers’ interpretation (Moustakas 1994).

Findings

Nostalgia

Various elements of nostalgia were cited throughout the interviews as reasons why participants decided to get involved in private land conservation efforts. While the term “nostalgia” was never mentioned specifically, the concept of nostalgia was overwhelmingly evident in the ways participants spoke about placing conservation easements on their properties and working with land trust organizations. All interviewees made reference to idealized notions of rural life and days gone by, pristine landscapes of the past, or the desire to protect remaining pastoral and wild lands in the face of impending development, indicating that nostalgia was a central factor both motivating and guiding their land protection and conservation efforts. Moreover, different aspects of the land were reportedly protected, and land use activities allowed, depending on the type of nostalgia that had motivated the landowner to place a conservation easement on their land.

Victims of violent change

Many respondents focused largely on the importance of preserving open space in the landscape and indicated that they themselves had placed conservation easements primarily on farmland, wetlands, forested land, and other open natural and agricultural parcels. Many spoke solemnly about the rapid pace of development that had already gobbled up much of the local wild and agricultural landscape and indicated that they feared their land would be next. “The construction and the housing that was going in was so rampant,” explained one respondent. Another stated that she and her family were deeply troubled by expanding development. “We were concerned that the property behind us... would be commercialized... and lo and behold it was, so we wanted to protect [our] parcel”.

The surge of development in their local areas left respondents feeling as if the landscape was changing too quickly. One respondent for example told of his return from an extended trip to Europe and the shock he experienced upon arriving back home. “Being away for two years really allowed me to notice how fast sprawl was happening in Southwest Ohio,” he said. “Because of the two year time block,” he went on, “that really showed you a lot more change than if you were just looking at it from a day to day basis”. Another, echoing the same notion, lamented on how the quaint village she called home had expanded from a population of 5000 to a population of over 35,000 in just a few years, and how as a result “everything” she loved about the area was “disappearing”. Fond memories of an undeveloped countryside juxtaposed against contemporary landscapes filled with recent housing developments and shopping centers prompted many respondents to consider how they could help sustain local wild and natural environments. This situation motivated these participants to pursue private land protection efforts in order to conserve primarily undeveloped, natural lands (as opposed to the agricultural landscapes that other respondents reported focusing their efforts on), and restore native fauna, topography, and wildlife.

Place attachment

Elements of place attachment were also evident in the nostalgic desire to protect the local environment against future development. As Farmer et al. (2011b) argue, people are often motivated to participate in land protection efforts because of the great value they place on specific pieces of land that connect to their personal identity. Yet, as Halfacre (2015) explains, place attachment is often cultivated from nostalgic fond and idealized memories of days gone by and happy experiences had in specific physical settings in the landscape, which in turn elicit sentimental feelings bonding individuals to those places. It is easy to see how nostalgia works to facilitate place attachment in the way one interviewee reminisced about

her family’s land. “My grandfather and grandmother moved here in 1900 and my father and my mother lived here all their lives, and I have lived here all my life,” she claimed happily. She went on to declare, “I love my land... I have so many memories of when I grew up and all the things that happened here... I just think that it would be a shame to see all that changed”. Others spoke with joy as they described momentous family occasions that had taken place on their properties. “My grandfather, and my father and his brothers were all born on the farm... and,” one woman exclaimed with pride, “some of my grandchildren were born on the farm”.

These interviewees were focused primarily on protecting family homestead buildings including old homes and old barns, and childhood play spots such as nearby fishing and swimming holes, wooded areas, and wildlife viewing locations. Consequently, respondents motivated by a nostalgic sense of place set up conservation easements on their land that allow for activities such as hunting, timber harvesting, and traditional farming practices to continue in perpetuity. While many in this category reported a high level of respect for the natural and wild features of their properties, few indicated that they had participated in or planned to participate in ecological restoration efforts on their lands. Rather, they were dedicated to preserving elements of their own individual past and seemed to have little concern about the larger notion of land conservation in the USA.

Rural life valued

There was also a heavy focus on the desire to stop incessant development exemplifying respondents’ affection for pastoral and wild landscapes and related vocations. Many idealized the agricultural-based life of the past and seemed to believe that it was more desirable, wholesome, meaningful, and fulfilling than contemporary modern life. “Farmers today, they don’t farm like they used to,” one respondent stated with a touch of disdain. “They used to (sic) grow a little of everything and they would rotate the crops and the animals,” she went on, explaining her concern over the decline in popularity of traditional farming practices. “Corn is about all they grow these days,” she continued, echoing what other respondents had also mentioned, later noting that commercial- and subsidiary-driven growers now outnumber the quaint, family-owned farms that once dotted the southwestern Ohio countryside.

Study participants who echoed these same sentiments reported that they had conserved primarily farmland (as opposed to wild landscapes or specific buildings) and expressed a desire to continue the legacy of farming on the land they had protected (as reflected in the conservation easement restrictions they had set up). Idealizing the agricultural practices of yesteryear, one woman explained that she had placed a conservation easement on her land because

she was specifically interested in “preserving [the practice of] farming more than preserving the land” itself. Another explained that her parcel had “been a farm since 1848” and there was a “value in keeping the farm with the history preserved”. “We need to protect things before they’re destroyed,” reasoned another respondent, seemingly seeing the agricultural countryside of the past as far superior to the contemporary landscape of the Midwest, “because once they’re developed it doesn’t ever seem to go back”.

There was also an underlying desire to restore land to some romanticized former natural state wherein it was perceived to have been in “pristine” condition. Illustrating this notion, one woman explained that her county had been losing native oak trees at an alarming rate. “We had many, many cut down... and with the development, nobody replanted (sic), so we lost a lot of beautiful oak land for the next generation coming along... and habitat... wonderful woodland with only native wildlife”. Similarly, a number of interviewees spoke of a desire to “cull invasive species,” do “prescribed burns,” and “reintroduce native plants (sic)” hoping to restore the natural balance that they believe had once existed in the local area.

Others noted a hope that abundant wildlife would return to or remain on their protected lands believing there had been a plethora of animals running wild through their property before the invasion of modernity. One woman feared that the “incredible amount of birds and wildlife” that had been on her property were declining in number because of local development and that they would be further “displaced or [would] go away” had she not placed a conservation easement on her parcel. “I actually purchased a piece of land from my brother in order to keep him from maybe draining... a small wetlands,” another man stated, describing how there was “threatened and endangered species” on the property worth saving. Others looked towards the future. One woman explained that she had protected 76 acres of wooded and wild land because there was “a lot of wildlife in the area” and she believed that her land would allow “the wildlife to have more access... and a buffer zone” between their natural habitats and the expanse of development swallowing up the neighboring properties.

The fondness for a rural existence and a romanticized version of the natural landscape illustrates how the past was believed to have been home to a both a better life and a better landscape, one that was balanced, wholesome, bountiful, and even pristine. This was largely based on the notion that modern society was responsible for the fatal demise of the “good old days” and exemplifies the central characteristic of nostalgia—that our ancestors had it better than us. Together, these notions of stopping time and protecting land against future development show that respondents are ultimately driven by a shared and underlying belief that the past was somehow superior to the present. In turn, respondents included restrictions in their conservation

easements that aligned with their idealized notions of history and worked to protect only the landscapes that were in line with their particular nostalgic perceptions of the past.

Simple and vicarious nostalgia

Both simple nostalgia cultivated from idealized memories of one’s own personal experiences, *and* vicarious nostalgia wherein personal memories are supplemented with both real and fictional images of the past encountered through cultural references were also indicated repeatedly as factors motivating study participants to engage in private land protection efforts. Several respondents conveyed a fondness and admiration for an era in history that had come and gone well before their own lifetimes had even begun, and noted that this appreciation had influenced their decision to place a conservation easement on their property. One woman explained that she had placed a conservation easement because her land was both beautiful and rural, and home to “Native American fortifications” which she reasoned were important in their own right. Another man spoke warmly about how his property had been an apple orchard back in the early 1800s. He indicated that a friend had gone to the local courthouse and had “looked up the original deed for the land”. The friend discovered that the property had been “a gift land, [something] that they were doing when Thomas Jefferson was President, and [that] he (Thomas Jefferson) actually signed the deed...[because] it had originally been a land grant to encourage Westerners to settle”. The man went on to state that he kept and proudly displayed a copy of the original deed for all to see. In both cases, respondents focused on the importance of vintage relics whose historic significance was established decades, or even centuries before. In this sense, a fondness and admiration for a time before their own births was just as pivotal in their decision to participate in land protection efforts as factors based on simple nostalgia and, in turn, ultimately dictated which elements of their properties they chose to protect.

While both simple and vicarious examples of nostalgia were evident throughout the interviews, they are not mutually exclusive concepts. Instead, they appear to work together to inspire land protection efforts.

Land conservation and middle age

Interestingly, all of the respondents interviewed indicated that they had either become involved with private land conservation efforts or placed a conservation easement on their property during middle adulthood (defined roughly as life stage encountered between the ages of 40–60 years old) or early in their late adult years. Whether this was due primarily to nostalgia, a culmination of life events that allowed individuals to consider private land conservation or place easements on their properties, a combination of both factors, or simply

coincidence remains unclear. While some study participants noted that they were retired and therefore had more time on their hands to pursue their interests, and others indicated that they had inherited land and found themselves wondering what to do with it, many respondents circled back around to citing an increased concern over who would gain possession of their land (or the local land around them) after they had passed on and how that land would be managed. In turn, they chose to pursue land protection efforts during the middle years of their lives when the recognition of their own mortality began to creep into their thoughts. One man noted how, after retirement, he had more time to consider the future and became “worried about what to do with my property”. “In the back of my mind,” said another respondent, articulating what a number of others had alluded to, “I have this property... I don’t have children, so [I thought] what would I do with it long term?” In this sense, it is again evident that nostalgia, incorporating both a notion that things are changing too rapidly and a fear of the uncertainty of the future, was a motivating factor in the decision to participate in conservation efforts.

Conclusions

Differing nostalgic catalysts

Although this small study was limited to landowners representing only one geographic region of the USA, it highlights the pivotal role nostalgia plays in shaping the American landscape through private land conservation. A romanticized and bittersweet notion of the past not only motivated respondents to place conservation easements on their land, but also heavily influenced which elements of the land they sought to preserve. This study is not intended to produce a perfect typology or overriding theory characteristic of *all* private landowners who consider placing conservation easements on their properties; rather, it illustrates the need for a better understanding of the role of nostalgia in private land conservation. Further, it takes an important step towards helping to clarify who is participating in private land conservation, why, and how their motivations may impact the American landscape.

While nostalgia, social memory, and artistic renderings have long been recognized as forces shaping all landscapes and our interaction with them (Lefebvre 1992; Schama 1996; Taun 1974), understanding how different manifestations of nostalgia influence private land protection may help both conservation biologists and land trusts to better meet their conservation goals. This study lays the groundwork for further exploration, which could allow conservation biologists to gain a clearer picture of the types of lands that are currently being protected by conservation easements and some insight into what may be protected in the future.

Further investigation may reveal the likelihood that particular geographic features, ecosystems, or individual species will or will not be protected. For instance, conservation of only aesthetically pleasing pastoral landscapes and associated land use practices (such as traditional farming practices) may not actually be good for the land, threatened or endangered species, or the preservation of particular ecosystems. Other easements excluding particular recreational uses such as hunting may alter local ecosystems by allowing one species to over-populate an area. Recognizing how nostalgia may play a role in these practices would allow conservation biologists to respond accordingly.

Understanding how nostalgia plays a role in the land protection efforts pursued by individuals could also help conservation organizations to recruit new volunteers, motivate existing volunteers and advocates, and continue to increase the amount of private land protected through conservation easements. Given the fragmented nature of conservation by private landowners, some clarity about the underlying factors impacting individual preservation decisions could allow land trusts and other conservation organizations to streamline volunteer, education, advocacy, and land protection efforts. Shared images of nostalgia could also be used to invigorate public interest in land protection efforts, which could, in turn, open the door for community education, local partnerships, and increased financial support for projects aimed at conserving the local environment.

Sources of nostalgia

In both cases, a more thorough understanding of how the particular contemporary conceptions of ideal American landscapes (rural and wild) are cultivated would be helpful. In Great Britain, for instance, the nostalgic image of a quintessential “English Countryside” was, for decades, considered a symbol of national identity and pride. Characterized by open space and rolling hills speckled with patches of forest and farmland, quaint villages, and broad hedge-lined avenues leading to grand estates, conservation efforts adopted in recent decades have ensured that the picturesque landscape stays frozen in time. However, while widely recognized and aesthetically pleasing, Mandler (1997) asserts that this nostalgic notion of “Englishness” in the landscape is actually a “historical construct that was developed towards the end of the nineteenth century by the ‘dominant class’ in British society... [who] purveyed [it] to the wider culture by means of a potent array of educational and political instruments” (p. 155). Regardless, the shared nostalgic image of the British countryside has been a driving force in the country’s largely successful land conservation efforts.

Perhaps there is also a cultural or historical explanation for the uniquely American conception of an idealized domestic landscape that has been guiding private conservation efforts, like those associated with public land conservation. In this

study, all respondents, for example, were born between the years of 1925 and 1957, and therefore would have entered adolescent (roughly ages 10–19) during the periods from 1935 to 1976, an era that saw a wave of animated Disney movies released. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the immensely popular, full theatrical-length cartoons centered largely on the value and mystery of nature, and prominently featured landscapes chalked full of vibrant plants and abundant animal life living in perfect harmony. Davis (1979) asserts that people are often nostalgic for things encountered and experienced during their adolescent years. Thus, it is certainly possible that a connection exists between the idealized images of the landscape produced and perpetuated by Disney and the nostalgic images of the landscape driving individual land conservation efforts in the USA. However, more research is needed in order to both confirm and further explore this possible connection.

Though some scholars argue that nostalgia can be hard to predict, many industries have found success forecasting which elements of the past consumers will find appealing and therefore nostalgic for. Recent television shows such as “The Goldbergs” and “Stranger Things” whose 1980s-inspired episodes have been extremely popular, incorporate the lighter elements of the decade recalling elements of fashion, music, and cinema, but are careful to leave out any in-depth examination of the Cold War, the recession, or the AIDS epidemic. Major league sports often bank on nostalgia too. They design vintage-looking stadiums (but include air conditioning, WiFi, and comfort seating), sell throwback jerseys (made of the newest synthetic moisture wicking fabric), and honor retired players as heroes all while strategically avoiding any acknowledgement of the physical risks associated with participating in many sports in the past. Likewise, many tourism entities provide visitors with opportunities to experience elements of the past for entertainment. Though unsavory or overly complex aspects are thoroughly scrubbed from the narrative and components of “history” cherry picked for the audience. In the American south for instance, visitors can savor the architectural beauty of many antebellum plantations while sipping mint juleps with only minimal reminders of the slaves who built them.

Shaping the landscape

While landscapes are always framed and therefore imbued with particular meaning relevant to the culture that consumes them (Lefebvre 1992; Sauer 1925; Schama 1996; Soja 1989; Taun 1974), and we can therefore never escape nostalgia (along with other forms of memory and social phenomena) as a force shaping the land (see Schama 1996), landscapes created strictly as a result of idealizing the past do not necessarily reflect an accurate depiction of the history of rural Midwest America (see Duncan and Duncan 2001; Stokowski 2002). In addition to ecological

restoration efforts that seek to reestablish a romanticized yet unrealistic “pristine” landscape that likely never existed in nature (see Merchant 2007), saving only aesthetically pleasing and personally meaningful farm buildings for instance showcases only limited architectural styles and eras in rural American history. Preserving only one type of historic site such as Native American fortifications reflects only a limited version of the past—a version where indigenous peoples are seen as one homogenous group and their culture is idealized (Ellingson 2001) thereby allowing the image of the noble savage to be perpetuated.

Further, conservation efforts aimed at preserving traditional farming methods fail to create landscapes that represent the many social injustices and environmental problems that resulted from such practices. The picturesque pastoral landscapes created under these pretenses do not reflect an accurate version of the past that included a reliance on child labor, the creation of man-made natural disasters like the dust bowl, or the ways in which antiquated livestock management practices significantly damaged native wildlife populations. Thus, while nostalgia may be a popular social phenomenon with many potential applications in terms of bolstering land conservation efforts, it is also shaping large swaths of the rural American landscape with unknown consequences. The creation of less than cohesive rural landscapes as a result of subjective nostalgic motivations could present problems for city planners, conservation biologists, and other entities working towards larger ecological restoration, wildlife management, or water conservation goals. Additionally, the aesthetically pleasing aspects of the countryside that are molded on a romanticized image of the agricultural-based past may allow for particular dominant ideologies to be both perpetuated and reinforced within the landscape.

Nonetheless, private land protection using conservation easements is an exciting and promising approach to conservation in the USA (Cheever 1996; Morrisette 2001). Through private land protection, threatened and endangered plant and animal species may be brought back from the brink of extinction, quintessential visual aspects of the landscape may be saved from development, and important ecosystems might be maintained or even restored. Conflicts over land use such as the shrinking of Bear Ears National Monument (Curry and Reid 2017), the proposed road through the federally protected 492-mile² Izembek National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska (Bronstein et al. 2017), and the Dakota Access Pipeline crossing the Standing Rock Reservation spanning the North and South Dakota border (Cruel 2017) have drawn attention to the use of public lands. As fights over the management of public lands continue, there will no doubt be a renewed interest in all types of land conservation, particularly private land conservation. Thus, the need for further research about this potentially powerful tool in the conservation of America’s open spaces is urgent.

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