

The Heart and Soul of Communities in Eastern Washington

The “heart and soul” of a community are those enduring special places, relationships, practices and traditions by which people in communities sustain themselves and give their lives meaning, the absence of which would diminish the quality of community life. The Spokane District of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) asked James Kent Associates to conduct social and cultural descriptions of communities in eastern Washington in preparation for its upcoming land use planning process in 2010. Two to five JKA associates spent three months living in the towns of Colville, Davenport, Odessa, Oroville, Okanogan, Wenatchee, Ellensburg, Yakima, Pasco, Richland and Kennewick. Many heart and soul elements were found through the involvement and engagement of the citizens.

The people who live in these communities are outdoor people. They are practical and hard-working. They are “traditional” in that many of them still make their living in ranching, farming, forestry and mining. At the same time, their numbers are growing from urbanites leaving the city for more authentic experiences of small town living, thus making room for architects, lawyers, planners and other professional occupations. In addition many are “coming home” after 15 to 25 years of being gone. A key theme emerged: “we came back.” People seeking to come back to a geographic place where they could live in a heart and soul environment.

What we found in this area is a profound conscious shift towards the development of outdoor recreation amenities as an economic development strategy that is accompanied by an emphasis on conservation and natural resource education. This shift is associated with two widespread trends, one toward citizen based stewardship and the second toward multi-interest, multi-jurisdictional collaboration that appears to be transforming local communities. Hence, this enduring practice of outdoor activity is being transformed into a means of livelihood, but people are not giving away the store. They want their special places protected, they are working actively to do so, and they are becoming skilled in collaborative coalitions as a means to achieve their goals.

The quotes below from our fieldnotes organized under heading of Special Places, Citizen-based Stewardship and Collaboration Processes indicate the breadth of these discovered heart and soul elements.

Special Places

“I had too much city. I like the smallness of the area. There is a general friendliness in the Okanogan area. People greet strangers and there is a welcoming feel to the whole area.”

“We enjoy BLM lands in the early spring. We hike, look at mine shafts, do metal detecting along the Similkameen River.”

“We came back to take care of my parents.”

“I came back for the small town life, a desire to be outdoors.” [Chelan]

“My family and parents are still here. It is a predominantly farming-based community.”
[Waterville resident]

“I love the Apple Festival. Everybody comes. I take my panel truck and park it where I can get a good view for the parade, and watch with my friends. There is a classic car parade, too.” [Wenatchee]

“This area is changing. There is more talk of quality of life, not just development no matter what. Trails would never have had this focus years ago.” [Wenatchee]

“I used to swim all the time there as a kid.” [Douglas Creek]

“We have not gone out [to Juniper Dunes, near Tri-Cities] this year, but we went 10-11 times last year. We really enjoy it. We like winter the best, October to May, because you get better traction in the sand.”

“We regularly go out to Juniper Dunes with about 12 in our circle, and we often meet another 12 out there that come from Benton City. We camp and ride. We love it the way it is. This is best time of year. Later in the season when more people are out there, we don’t go, and go elsewhere.” [Franklin County resident]

Citizen-based Stewardship

“The clubs I have been involved with have worked with State DNR [Department of Natural Resources] to preserve structures in the Stemilt Basin and the Colockum area. Our club did the manual labor and volunteered their time. This was a good relationship. We even raised money to rent the land for parking.”

“The land is a gift for everybody, regardless of class or status. These are amazing resources around here and good efforts should still be made to preserve them.” [Chelan County]

“The Wenatchee Sportsmen’s Association helped clean up the lower Douglas Creek Trail. We did 7,000 hours of volunteer time. A school group from Waterville did the clean up in the upper Douglas creek area. I personally talked with many Douglas Creek folks to educate them that if they close this area people will still use it; the trash will not go away. The only way to get it cleaned up is to get more people actively using the land in the area. Clubs recreating will reduce crime, trash, and that sort of thing.”

“For volunteer efforts, there is no trouble getting enough help.”

“There should be more education of the younger generation about stewardship because a few ruin it for the many. Education is key in the schools, in programs, etc. It is human nature for some to be wild, but we can work to avoid it.”

“We have done improvement projects out there and we’ve done self-policing, like we monitor the fences, inspect the guzzlers, and identify weeds for spraying. There have been many group projects. Fences were burned down.”

“In the big fire, my new corrals all burned and the fences burned too. My wife called a work day and we had 75 people show up. It was all replaced in a day. My family members were all work crew bosses and directed the work. The grange burned, too.”

Collaboration Processes

“If planning is really going to be collaborative, you can look at the most successful organizations. They say leave your hat at the door. That means that control is shared, that all perspectives have value. It takes awhile to get there. It took awhile for us before local people and environmental groups realized we are all in it together.”

The Wenatchee Foothills Community Strategy is an effort to bring developers, local and state government, and recreation interests together to foster design in development that promotes conservation and outdoor recreation while enhancing property values.

“There is different thinking now. Coalitions are evidence of this. Everybody is getting better at this.”

“A community-based approach will build a long term commitment to the plan and reduce protest. When you have a community-based process, it is hard for the district manager to change it, and it’s hard for outsiders to get to you.”

“It’s been a wonderful experience doing the volunteer work and working with BLM. It is still a priority for me. Trust has wonderful momentum.” [Trail volunteer]

Heart and Soul elements are important because they reveal essential aspects of community life which must be preserved and enhanced to provide cultural continuity and resilience into successive generations. JKA finds that when planning and management activities of organizations and government units are based on these considerations, they not only contribute to the sustainability, livability and health of the communities but to the success of the organization’s mission as well.