

## People, Rivers and Recreation: Fluid Relationships of Place and Experience on the Clutha River, Otago, New Zealand

*Andrea Farminer – Graduated 2013*

### Abstract

The relationships between people and their outdoor environments are understood as diverse, complex and often contested with the result that examining the meanings people have for places such as rivers and placing value on them is challenging. Rivers are sites of multiple meanings and values – economic, political and socio-cultural – that have been shaped, claimed and contested into the present. In particular, the freshwater values that rivers represent have strongly dictated how people-river relationships are understood and valued, primarily through western, utilitarian economic frameworks which abstract and simplify rivers into unitary values and in doing so, overlook the complexities and richness that these relationships have to offer. This thesis argues that such rich and fluid relationships can be better conceived if a place and meanings-based perspective is engaged with, facilitating a re-examination of our utilitarian-framed values. Through the lens of *place*, conceptualised as fundamental to human experience through co-creating contextualised, dynamic spaces of relational, material, temporal and socio-political events, so the more nuanced, grounded and contested aspects of people-river relationships can be explored and re-framed.

This study undertook an exploration of one constituent of the diverse people-river relationships - *recreation* - through a place perspective which examined the experiences and meanings of recreation and rivers for a group of participants. Using an interpretive hermeneutic methodology, the study interviewed a group of thirteen participants regarding their life-long recreational experiences and meanings for the Clutha River, Otago, New Zealand. By framing the interviews within the lens of place and place-experience meanings, so the study ascertained fresh insights into how participants' meanings for both their Clutha recreational and broader life place-experiences were expressed, constructed and frequently contradicted. Continuing the interpretive methodology via an adapted thematic analysis, the diverse, situated and numerous contextual insights captured through the participant interviews were explored more deeply.

The findings of the study show that the meanings for, and relationships between, the participants and the Clutha River have changed over time for a variety of reasons: physical changes to the river itself and places along it; changes to participants' recreational interests; and broader life changes which reflect the interwoven nature of participants' recreation-life experiences. The range of meanings held for the Clutha reflect not just participants' recreational activity experiences, but also their family, work, cultural and place-based experiences which combine to frequently produce vivid memories and stories that simultaneously reproduce/recreate the events, people and river-places of their experiences. Placing these findings within the research contexts of place and recreation, the thesis makes a contribution through providing one of few empirical studies of the multiple and complex constructions of place meanings for rivers, recreation experiences and their changing nature. The study challenges some of the long-held approaches to understanding recreation experience meanings especially in the context of rivers, through framing them as places rather than settings. It also lends support to the more recent and critical approaches to the importance of understanding place and place-making from a pluralistic position when conceiving human

experience and meaning. Finally, it adds to the very slim body of river-recreation research specific to New Zealand and its uniquely Pākehā and Māori cultural context.