

Place Matters: An Investigation of Farmers' Attachment to Their Land

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Abstract

Place attachment research can shed light on how farmers form relationships with their land and therefore have implications for landscape management and food systems. Unknown is how farmers develop place attachment. In this qualitative study, we examine psychological and physical experiences as antecedents to place attachment using attachment theory. Following 29 semi-structured interviews with 34 respondents in Upcountry South Carolina, we examined farmers' security-seeking and exploration behaviors. Farmers receive security through feelings of peace and safety while on their farm and provide economic security to their families and environmental security to their land. Farmers' exploring behaviors include trying to be more innovative in sustainable management of their land. This research helps elucidate how farmers develop attachment. It has implications for how farmers manage their resources as well as understanding the environmental, social, and economic impacts of these decisions and land conservation in the American south.

Keywords: conservation, farmer perceptions, farms, place attachment, sustainable agriculture

Introduction

In her extensive review of place attachment research, Lewicka (2011) asks, is place still important? Given the rapid pace of globalization, homogenization of landscapes, and virtualization of spaces and relationships, places with distinct character are disappearing (Giddens, 1991). Yet despite apparent changes, researchers have shown that places continue to hold special meaning (Comstock et al., 2010; Lewicka, 2010). Research has demonstrated peoples' place attachment to nature. Most recently, researchers have revealed attachment to areas where human and natural systems intersect, in particular fisheries (Urquhart & Acott, 2013) and farms (Hildenbrand & Hennon, 2005). Considering recent trends and

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dynamics of local food movements, farms have become potentially important places for community building and conservation. Most importantly, farmers' connection and level of attachment with their land may affect their lives and livelihoods as well as the consumers they serve.

Farmers' place attachment

Attachment to place is multifaceted, and includes physical (Stedman, 2003) and social (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001) dimensions. This is particularly true for farmers, who live, work, recreate, and socialize on their farm. Land is more than a place to grow crops; farms are locations with history, symbolic meaning, and repositories of emotion. Although literature is light, researchers have demonstrated farmers often have deep embedded place attachment (Dominy, 2001; Gray, 1998; Hildenbrand & Hennon, 2005; Kuehne, 2013). Place attachment is important due to its impact on how farmers view, and ultimately treat, their land. Encouraging place attachment may well assist in the best management of resources and promoting human well-being.

While the embedded relationship between farmers and their land has been documented, the mechanisms that facilitate such bonds are less understood (Burton, 2004). Gray (1998) proposed that attachment is attributable to the "genetic metaphor;" farmers believe their abilities are a part of them, just as sheep are bred for living on hillsides. Burton (2004) suggests a mechanism based on interlacing family identity through the expression of self in the land. Families often give a name to their farm, which in turn gives the family an identity. Although Burton's claim is important to identity research, his work assumes that only farmers on the same land for generations can have a strong attachment to their farm. Cheshire et al. (2013) found that farmers often remain attached to family farm property even when they engage in agribusiness elsewhere or have sold the family farm.

Our research starts with the assumption that farmers are attached to their land, and seeks to examine how farmers develop their attachments, regardless of land tenure or residence length. We ask, 'What is happening on farms that creates in farmers such a deep place attachment to their land?' What actions are occurring; the specific cognitive, emotional, and physical events that lead to attachment? By examining the mechanisms of place attachment and not merely its predictors, we elaborate upon the "how" of place attachment.

The process of place attachment

Understanding the process of place attachment has had limited study. Low (1992) proposed that social relations occurring in a place are the most important component opposed to a relationship with the land itself. Most research has

echoed this sentiment, claiming that the meaning of a place is formed solely through social interactions (Kyle & Chick, 2007). This view was contested by Stedman (2003), who noted the importance of physical places in place attachment. People can become attached to the meaning they give to a physical space, be it a mountain or a farm. Despite this debate over the importance of social versus physical aspects of place attachment and an extensive body of research demonstrating place attachment in both built and natural systems, we lack a broadly applicable explanation of the processes by which attachments form (Lewicka, 2011; Morgan, 2010; Williams & Vaske, 2003).

To investigate beyond the social and physical aspects of place attachment, researchers are adding other dimensions, including "process." Scannell and Gifford (2010) introduced a tripartate framework of people–place–process to offer a more holistic research approach that involves social interactions and physical place, as well as how attachment develops. In this paper, by focusing on "process" we explore the phenomenon of farmers developing place attachment. We utilize attachment theory of security exploration, a proposed mechanism of place attachment development (Lewicka 2011), to investigate ways farmers develop and maintain attachment to a farm property (Figure 1).

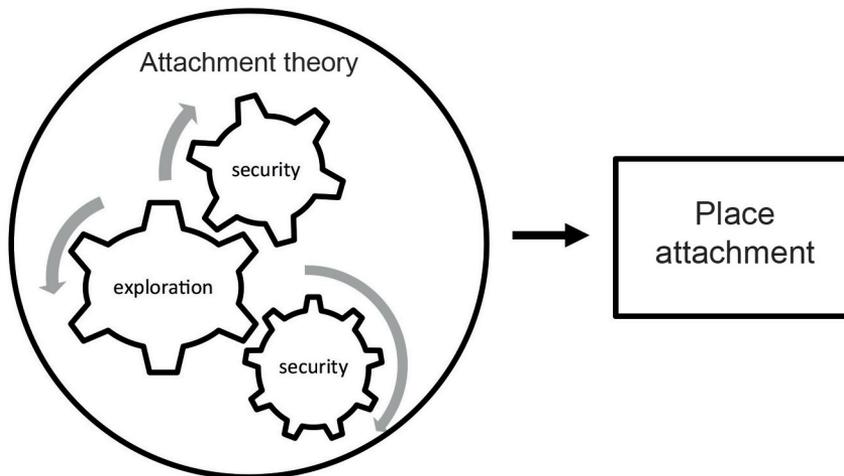


Figure 1. Proposed study mechanisms for development of place attachment

Attachment theory was originally proposed to explain the emotional bonds formed between an infant and caregiver (Bowlby, 1969). One proposed model of attachment development is an iterative cycle between exploration and security behaviors (Morgan, 2010). Researchers have more recently applied the idea of security and exploration to attachment with a particular place. Place attachment results from the association between the positive effect experienced when feeling secure and the sense of adventure and mastery resulting from exploratory behavior (Lichtenberg, 1989). While Lichtenberg claimed that strong place bonds are only possible when children remain in one place for the duration of their childhood, others note that place attachment can occur when settings are instilled with meanings that create or enhance an emotional tie, regardless of a person's age (Cuba & Hummon, 1993). Several studies have proposed that a primary role of place attachment is to provide a sense of security (Chatterjee, 2005; Fried, 2000). Interestingly, however, attachment theory of security and exploration has not been explored in adults' place attachment. This rich theory may provide insight into how place attachment occurs in adults.

Study area

The Upcountry of South Carolina comprises 10 counties in the uppermost region of the state. The area lies adjacent to the stretch of the Appalachians known as the Blue Ridge Mountains. The land was originally forested but has experienced heavy soil erosion due to extensive pasture and crop production (Carbone & Hidore, 2008). From 1790 to the end of the Civil War in 1865, cotton production was the most important economic activity in the American south and continued to play a role in the agricultural economy of the Piedmont region through the 1940s.

At present, farming remains South Carolina's second-largest industry, contributing US\$36 billion in annual revenue and sustaining 460,000 jobs. Since 1960, however, the number of farms across the state has declined from 86,000 to 24,000.² The rising costs of labor, fuel, pesticides, and fertilizer, as well as packing fees and out-of-state competition, are leading many farmers to sell much of their property to developers and/or leave the business altogether (Halfacre, 2012).

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA, 2007) reports over 8,000 farms in Upcountry South Carolina, coming close to a million acres in farmland. Yet the average farm size remains small at 120 acres. Although there are a high number of farms, 81 percent report less than US\$10,000 per year in the value of farm sales and 66 percent of farm operators maintain their primary source of income off-farm (USDA, 2007). Many of these small farmers supply the

2 United States Census Bureau population estimates 1990, 2000, 2007, 2011.

increased demand for local food. There is a growing trend of consumers actively seeking local farm products in South Carolina. Consumers can choose from farmers markets, roadside stands, community supported agriculture programs where customers pay a fee and receive a box of fresh produce weekly from a farmer, or purchase local foods at small and larger grocery stores. One indicator of burgeoning interest in local food in this region is the presence of *Edible Upcountry*—a quarterly periodical that has expanded from 10,000 to 17,000 distributions in less than three years.

Methods

This empirical phenomenological study seeks to understand the lived experiences of farmers in relation to their land. Phenomenology seeks to describe the meaning, or universal essence, a group of people assign to their lived experiences of a specific phenomenon with descriptions of “what” is experienced as well as “how” it is experienced while researchers set aside their personal understandings to concentrate on the experience of participants (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). We performed a regional case study to explore the nuances of farmer perceptions and shed light on dynamics not previously studied (Yin, 2014). To explore our research question—what is the process that farmers engage in to develop place attachment?—we draw on data from 29 semi-structured interviews with 34 farmers, collected in winter 2012–2013. The goal of the interviews was to converse with farmers regarding their history, experiences, and perceptions on farming. An interview protocol was developed including questions about farming history, challenges and joys, production practices, and conservation views and behaviors. Participants were identified through purposeful typical case sampling and snowball sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002) techniques. Purposeful typical case sampling is conducted with the cooperation of key informants who can identify who and what are typical cases (Patton, 2002). Snowball sampling is a preferred method of recruiting research participants when the goal of research is to examine a lived experience, and not to test a series of predetermined hypotheses of a representative sample to allow for extrapolation to the whole (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). It is recommended to conduct between 5 and 25 interviews for a phenomenological study (Polkinghorne, 1989). Through this process we accessed a wide array of farm types found in the Piedmont, including small organic produce farms, orchardists, small poultry and livestock farms, and large conventional produce operations.

The goal of the interviews was to generate a dialogue to elucidate farmers' knowledge and experiences regarding their attachment to their farm. Our purpose was to investigate the richness of experiences as well as meanings

farmers attribute to their land. Semi-structured interviews were conducted as conversations, with open-ended questions to allow interviewees to express themselves freely. Two researchers were present for each interview, which occurred most often on the interviewees' farm. Interviews lasted between one and two hours. Researchers were encouraged to explore topics in-depth by asking follow-up questions. At the end of each interview, demographic profiles were collected. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. Using RQDA qualitative analysis software (Huang, 2012), we first highlighted significant statements of textural and structural description using quotes under the *a priori* codes of (1) security and (2) exploration (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Next, we developed clusters of meaning from the significant statements into themes regarding attachment theory (Moustakas, 1994). The evidence presented below draws from answers elicited through structured questions or indirectly through continuing conversations.

Results

Twenty-nine farms were included in our interviews, with 34 farmers participating. Our sample comprised 25 men and 9 women. The average age for men was 56, with a range from 35 to 82. The average age for women participants was 53, with a range from 28 to 65. Twenty-four respondents own their land and four lease. One farmer is a manager for a university farm who neither owns nor leases the land. We collected data on farm size, main production ventures (Table 1), and land tenure, and categorized farms according to the work relationships of the primary farm operator(s), although farms could be categorized under more than one area (Table 2). Most farms were small in geographic scale, ranging from less than 2 acres to 30 acres. Two farms, one solely produce and one produce/livestock, were roughly 300 acres. One farmer leases land throughout the Upcountry and employs farm laborers on 2,500 discontinuous acres.

Table 1. Main production ventures

Farm products	
Vegetables	21
Orchards or berries	5
Dairy	1
Meat production	5
Goat (meat or dairy)	4

Table 2. Primary work relationships of operator(s)

Type of farm business	
Life partner	13
Business partner	1
Generational family	8
Individual	11
Sibling family	2

Almost all of our farmer participants expressed a deep attachment to their farm. The one exception was a farmer who rents patches of land in various places and grows conventional produce for wholesale. However, it should be noted that renting, as opposed to owning, land did not preclude farmers in our study from developing strong place attachment. When asked what their land means to them, many farmers had immediate strong and emotional reactions. Farmer responses often had a poignant note, comparing their land to a member of their family or the place where they feel spiritually fulfilled.

Security as a driver of attachment

The relationship farmers have with their land is complex. From our analysis, three primary themes emerged regarding place attachment development and security. First, interviewees reported they receive security from their land through a sense of safety or peace. Second, farmers reported they provide security to their land by acting as stewards. And third, farmers reported they are seeking security by creating a thriving economic business and leaving a family legacy.

Farmers reported receiving security from their land. In light of attachment theory, a farmer represents the infant seeking security and the farm serves as caregiver. Farmers discussed the spiritual sense of peace and calm they find on their land. "It means way too much to me. I mean it sustains me, there's no doubt about it, um, it's truly my haven, it is a place where I can feel safe." The farm is a place that, despite hard physical work, farmers find time to relax and enjoy life. Several farmers discussed the therapeutic nature of working on their farms—perceiving their work as "feeding their soul." In addition, farm spaces contain a spiritual security for some. "I'm not very much of a religious person but from a spiritual perspective, this is where I'm happiest."

Some farmers described times when they received security from their farm during physical and medical hardships. Three farmers discussed how their farm helped them recuperate from a medical situation. "After my stroke I was paralyzed on the left side. My rehab was [my farm] out there. I could walk

around, I took a stool at first. The first year I took a stool with me and I'd sit down ... and next thing you knew I could actually walk 12 feet. And now I can—I have gotten a lot of strength back."

Second, farmers see themselves as providing security to their land, as caretakers or stewards. "It's my baby ... my second baby." In this sense, within attachment theory the farmer acts as the caregiver and the farm serves as the infant. Farmers engage in activities to improve and care for the land and animals such as building soil, invasive plant removal, water redistribution, sustainable agricultural practices (few or no pesticides, organic certification, free-range animals), and fence building. Some farmers consciously limit the physical size of their farm to be able to have a deeper understanding of their operation. "And we are standing here, and you can see it all. You can kind of wrap your arms around it in some sense that you can't get in a bigger place."

Farmers also provide security to their livestock on a day-to-day basis as well as during intense difficult situations such as birthing, death, or extreme weather. These experiences have had significant impact on our research participants, encouraging a strong sense of attachment to the animals themselves as well as the wholeness of farm life. Many farmers became emotional during our conversations when they discussed assisting in birthing baby animals or tending to animals during extreme weather. These memories and experiences clearly carried strong positive associations for farmers. "A couple of years ago I was out in the sleet rotating them [cattle], and I was out in the sleet moving electric wire to move the cows and I thought 'I love these animals' (gasps) I can't believe I thought that!"

Interestingly, we found a third relationship between farmers and their land that is not neatly explained by attachment theory. Farmers discussed that they are seeking economic security, which may or may not be their current reality, and to leave a family legacy. In this relationship, farmers are using the land to create a secure place and a living for their family. This supports previous research showing the importance of the relationship between economic dependence and sense of place for farmers (Crossa et al., 2011). Farmers work to create a secure financial living by engaging in production practices and economic ventures that will provide a stable income to ensure that the farm property will continue to be farmed in the future. In this relationship, the farm does not give security as a peaceful or spiritual place. Farming can be an economically unstable business, so the farmer must create his or her own security. Farmers discussed the importance of considering the farm as a business. "My sustainability is I have a threshold of this much money. I need to make this much money to survive in the farming business. If I don't make that much money, it doesn't matter how many tomatoes I grew, I can't make a living at that. And you have to make a living of this."

In addition, many farmers want to leave a legacy for their family. "I look at it as the future and the future of my family. So I look at it that way, I'm building up this land, taking care of this property. Making as many improvements as I can possibly do so that when they have it on their own it's not so tough as it was for me." Farmers want their children to feel the same sense of security that they do on farm property, even if their children are not currently living on the land or a daily part of farm work. "My goal has always been, I want my kids to always think of this as home. I want them wherever they choose to go in life, I want them to be able to come back to think of it, to preserve it."

To create and preserve a secure farm setting, farmers engage in practices and projects that will, hopefully, provide a more stable environment, such as water redistribution. "I want to be able to control the movement of water; that's the biggest thing because without water you cannot have life." Farmers also diversify produce and livestock operations for security. "One of the things you have to do with small farming, you have to diversify." In addition, farmers have expanded the use of their land to include non-production ventures such as agritourism to ensure a more stable income. "Weddings hosted at the farm have been a significant source of income."

Exploration as a driver of attachment

Although security is perhaps the ultimate goal of a farmer providing for their family, the role of farm as a place to explore was mentioned by almost every interviewee. Farmers' exploration includes mechanical fixes for old farm equipment, personal recreation, nature observation, and new production ventures including value-added products like goat-milk soap to heritage breed poultry to hundreds of apple or peach varieties. Farmers also experiment with new and different technologies such as online decision-making tools and energy sources such as windmills.

For farmers, security and exploration are connected as they hope their experiments will lead to greater economic or environmental security. However, farmers discussed how the process of trying new things is an innate part of who they are. For our farmers, exploring is a constant; a mindset and a part of their personality and identity. "You've got to be ready to research and experiment. You've got to always be thinking, 'what if I did this', and running scenarios all the time. You can't just sit and try and do one crop and expect you're going to make it. You got to continually look at markets and potentialities of what you could be doing, not just what you're doing now."

Many farmers have a deep need to try new things and solve problems, and being a farmer was an outlet for that desire. For 19 of our interviewees, farming is a second career. They left careers in areas such as marketing, design, or

construction. For a few it is a twilight career after retirement from business or academia. Most of our interviewees use production methods that combine historical methods (pesticide free) with modern science (soil testing, no-till, integrated pest management, etc.). Farmers relish relearning old techniques as well as devising novel systems. "Well that's where this new generation of farmers, that generation that was probably operating on passed down information is pretty much gone now, and in their places you have people who are trying to learn, trying to develop back into the process of studying different things." Farming is seen as a grand exploration and farmers appreciate the freedom to explore. "Each year you get a little better and your plants get a little better, more vigorous and healthy and you have crisis and you have failures and it gets more enjoyable, even the failures you see that as a learning opportunity."

Farmers use their land for personal and family recreation. Engaging in activities other than farm chores appears significant for forming a strong bond with the land. Fishing, hunting, horseback riding, target practice, family birthday parties, camping, hiking, nature photography, star gazing, mountain biking, paddling, and four-wheel driving are all activities farmers partake in on their land. "It's a life! Yeah, you know, on weekends I'll grab my daughter and we'll ride around, take a look at what's going on in the garden. Doing this and that, that's fun to me." Farmers also use their land for quiet reflection and meditation. "I've got my quiet spot on the very back side of the farm where I go and sit and think and do my work. Nobody can find me."

Interestingly, some farmers see their work as recreation itself. Many find it fun and enjoyable. "Sunday afternoon is the time to go check the cows. Now that's sort of work, it's taking care of what we have, but it's also fun, you know, and to me, recreation is something that's fun." Another farmer stated, "Oddly enough, the labor on the land, in many cases is recreation. You know, it's really relaxing to just go out there and prune vines, it's really relaxing to go out there and take the hoe and weed rows and hill beans and things of that nature. You're accomplishing something but it's also relaxing, I don't have to go to the gym to work out, I just go out to the backyard, and do that."

Farmers take a keen interest in the wild flora and fauna on their property. "I teach my granddaughter to identify birds and flowers. I used to take my little Sierra Club Wildflower book with me." Many farmers can identify wild plant species, birds, and mammals. They spend time watching the life cycles of wild creatures. These observations occur while engaged in everyday activities and recreation. "It's observation based as you go about your daily thing. The other morning I came out and there was a flock of 12 wild turkeys just out in pasture. And I could see 'em and they're just doing their thing." Place attachment is formed through experiences that are both mundane and extraordinary from spending time with family to bird watching and exploring the natural history

of the farm to connecting to nature in a spiritual manner when seeing particular wildlife or changes to the land. "I've got Henry my hawk, I call him my hawk, his territory is staked out around the farm. I get out on my tractor and start mowing grass, in the summertime he'll come off the trees and just sit there and fly right beside me."

Discussion

Our results align with previous studies showing that farmers can develop a deep connection with their land and animals. Here we move beyond descriptions of place attachment to investigate the process by which farmers develop their attachment to place. Though the attachment theory of childhood development is not a perfect analogy to explain the phenomenon of farmers developing place attachment to their farm, it did provide a valuable starting point. Through receiving, giving, and seeking security farmers act as both a caregiver to their land and one who receives care.

In receiving security from their land, farmers develop a deep place attachment. The farm provides a sense of peace and sometimes even helps farmers through difficult personal journeys. These results demonstrate the importance of place in development of place attachment, in that the relationship that is the impetus for attachment is between a person and their land and not merely the person-to-person interactions occurring there.

In providing security to their land, farmers are considering much more than economics. This security is a holistic consideration of the long-term well-being of the farm as a system, as well as day-to-day ethical consideration of welfare through healthy and happy animals. Farmers regard their role as caretakers to be a calling that provides purpose to their lives, more than a paycheck. Their role is to leave the land better than when they found it so that whoever uses it next will find a well cared for and ecologically healthy space. This larger purpose of farming connects farmers with land, animals, community, and the future in ways that help to create deep place attachment.

In finding the economic consideration of seeking security as a separate issue for farmers, we see a distinction between the ecological security of the farm itself and security of immediate home economics and a family legacy. The economic considerations of farm life were important to our farmers; they recognize that without this consideration they will not be farmers for long, but our farmers are not willing to sacrifice their role as providers of long-term ecological security and day-to-day ethical animal care for short-term economic profit.

Exploration was also found to be important to farmers' development of place attachment. The farmers in our study highly valued exploration experiences.

We found that farmers like to have new and novel problems to solve, and enjoy recreation and observing nature to explore the world on their farm property. For our farmers, the process of exploration is an innate part of their self-identity. Our participants were drawn to the life of a farmer, where daily problems lead to exploration opportunities to fix an old tractor, try a new crop rotation, or observe and learn about the pests attacking a plant. These things are seen as exciting adventures and opportunities to learn. When a challenge is successfully met, our farmers' self-identity is strengthened and a deeper relationship forms with the land that offered that opportunity.

When farmers recreate on their land, they have positive experiences with either surrounding nature and/or family and friends. These bonding experiences strengthen place attachment with the farm. Therefore, farmers bond with their land over both work and play. In addition, farmers spend a great deal of time observing daily rhythms of their crops and animals as well as surrounding natural flora and fauna. Bonding with the land through a special wild animal or in finding rare native flora creates attachment to the place in which this discovery occurred.

These findings are noteworthy as they depart from those of most place attachment studies that look at behaviors that result from place attachment, not behaviors that contribute to the development of place attachment. A better understanding of how place attachment develops will provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between a farmer and a farm. This research is a starting point for investigating the roles of various relationships that exist within a food system, between people and land as well as between farmers and consumers. Our data show development of place attachment, at least for farmers, is not necessarily dependent upon time in a location or childhood memories, but rather from specific experiences. We found new farmers (on their land for less than five years) reported a deep place attachment similar to farmers who have been on the same land for 20 years or more. Even farmers who lease their land reported a strong attachment to place. Our results can lend support to practitioners, extension agents, and advocates working to aid beginning farmers by demonstrating that experiences can alter perceptions. In addition, attachment to place opens doors for specific extension and outreach to have greater impact.

Our finding that security–exploration is an important mechanism for farmers' development of place attachment by no means precludes other variables and mechanisms from playing an important role in the process. As very little work has been conducted on the process of place attachment, numerous avenues exist to explore this topic further. Other methods of investigation could add to our understanding of the process, including observations, quantitative questionnaires, and work with new farmers to gauge and record their experiences of developing place attachment. Research should also examine what economic

or environmental benefits, if any, occur when farmers are attached to their land. How does place attachment influence behaviors including conservation, legacy planning, and production practices?

Future research should also examine place attachment developed by consumers who frequent particular farms and have a relationship with farmers. Important future research questions include: Can consumers develop place attachment with a farm? What process do consumers engage in to become attached to a farm? How can farmers promote such an attachment between consumers and their farm or consumers and themselves? What economic, social, and ecological benefits would a farm incur with a customer base that has a strong place attachment to their farm?

Through a more nuanced understanding of the process of place attachment, there will be more opportunities to promote farming and stewardship. The average age of farmers in the United States is now 57 and the fastest growing group of farm operators is those 65 years and older.³ Many local communities are attempting to foster new farmers to meet their desires for local farming and knowledge of where their food comes from. Place attachment may play an important role in encouraging younger generations to engage in this livelihood, and could also be key in affecting how sustainably all farmers manage their land. Place attachment provides a sense of connectivity and security for farmers. This connectivity to place can encourage a sense of community, individual well-being, and preservation of cultural heritage. A better understanding of how farmers develop place attachment can provide important insights about how place bonds are formed and how a robust and sustainable local food community is built.

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