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Feeling at Home from A Distance? How Geographical Distance and Non-Residency Shape Sense of Place among Private Forest Owners

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Abstract

Out-migration from rural areas and generational shifts create conditions whereby increasing numbers of private forest owners live at a distance from their forestland. Geographical distance and non-residency have been raised as issues that may possibly weaken these owners’ relationships with their properties. Drawing on the “sense of place” concept as a frame of analysis for 51 qualitative interviews with resident and nonresident private forest owners from two areas in Sweden, this study provides in-depth understanding of how geographical distance and place of residency shape owners’ feelings about their forest properties. The study shows that sense of place is constructed in complex and multifaceted ways over time and that social and historical contexts and processes beyond the forest environment can make owners feel closeness to their distant properties. Thus, geographical distance or residency alone does not explain variations in these forest owners’ feelings of distance or closeness to their properties.

Introduction

In the context of rural change, urbanization and globalization, there is an ongoing transformation of the private forest owner corps in European countries and the US towards increased heterogeneity in terms of their socio-economic characteristics, objectives, and values (e.g., Kvarda 2004; Hogl, Pregernig, and Weiss 2005; Kendra and Hull 2005; Rickenbach, Zeuli, and Sturgess-Cleek 2005; Wiersum, Elands, and Hoogstra 2005; Fischer et al. 2010; Urquhart and Courtney 2011; Haugen, Karlsson, and Westin 2016). Growing numbers of private forest owners1 are no longer directly dependent on their forestland for their livelihood and their relationships to their forests go beyond financial considerations to a wide range of values and meanings, such as nature conservation, recreation, and personal enjoyment (Kvarda 2004; Kendra and Hull 2005; Wiersum, Elands, and Hoogstra 2005; Ingemarson, Lindhagen, and Eriksson 2006; Nordlund and Westin 2011; Urquhart and Courtney 2011).
In particular, with out-migration from rural areas and generational shifts, owners living at a distance from their property and often in urban areas, are an expanding group (Wiersum, Elands, and Hoogstra 2005; Haugen, Karlsson, and Westin 2016). As a result, both research and practice often distinguish between resident and nonresident owner groups. Non-resident “absentee” owners have been identified as having a weaker base in conventional forest ownership and conditions than rural-based owners. For instance, they might be more passive or indifferent concerning production-oriented forest management, be more inclined towards environmental management, and view their property with a more social and recreational focus (Kvarda 2004; Wiersum, Elands, and Hoogstra 2005; Urquhart, Courtney, and Slee 2010). Research has pointed to the need to further understand the complex context of the demographic diversity in which owners form their ties with their forests (Fischer et al. 2010; Nordlund and Westin 2011; Lähdesmäki and Matilainen 2014). Specifically, questions have been raised whether the relationship, or attachment, between the spatially distant new generations of nonresidents and their forestland, is changing or weakening, which can, for example, influence forest management or time spent at the property (Westin et al. 2017). In fact, if emotional linkages gained through experiences and meanings connected to the place of the forestland are not fostered within the family, a successful transfer of forest to the next generation could be jeopardized (Creighton, Blatner, and Carroll 2015). In the same vein, owners’ relationships with a certain place can be central to understanding their emotional ties to forestland (Jörgensen and Stjernström 2008). Rather than requiring links to occupation, livelihood or management, forest owners’ deep-seated emotional ties relate to the interpretation of their own forestland as being a significant location that has personal and historical connections, for example, through its having been owned for a long time, inherited, or as symbolic family heritage (Jörgensen and Stjernström 2008; Creighton, Blatner, and Carroll 2015; Markowski-Lindsay et al. 2016).

Thus, these studies have indicated that there is a link between forest owners’ relationship with their forestland and their sense of place. “Sense of place” is considered a key concept for understanding the subjective meanings of human-environment relations, emotions, and bonds developed in relation to a place (Tuan 1977; Cresswell 2014). Sense of place is acquired and formed by individuals or groups through their experiences and interactions with the physical and social features of a place in which they live, visit, use, or manage (Jorgensen and Stedman 2001; Stedman 2003; Soini, Vaarala, and Pouta 2012). In social science natural resource research, sense of place has been identified as useful since it distinguishes values that extend beyond the instrumental and biocentric to include emotional, cultural, symbolic, and historic meanings (Williams 2002). These meanings are regarded as important because they contribute to shaping not only people’s values but also their concerns, commitment and involvement when it comes to the care, management, and control of places (Eisenhauer, Krannich, and Blahna 2000; Larson, De Freitas, and Hicks 2013; Lin and Lockwood 2014).

Sweden is a relevant case in this context as it is a country where historically a strong focus on production and economic values has prevailed (Mårald, Sandström, and Nordin 2017), and where forestland is predominantly private, with more than 300,000 private, non-industrial forest owners who control around half of the country’s productive forest area (Haugen, Karlsson, and Westin 2016). In Sweden, people who have
recently acquired forestland are generally younger than longer-term owners, they are
more often female, they live further away from their property, and they show a higher
employment rate, higher income, and higher educational level (Lidestav et al. 2017).
There has been a concern that an increasing share of owners residing further away
from their properties could, over time, result in decreased forestry production, even if
this has so far not been demonstrated (Haugen, Karlsson, and Westin 2016; Lidestav
et al. 2017). However, if owners become more distanced from their forest in both a geo-
graphical and emotional sense, there could ultimately be implications for policy and
practice in forestry, environmental protection, recreation, local consultations on land
issues, and land use planning (Keskitalo 2017). Using the lens of the sense of place con-
cept and drawing upon the Swedish case, this article aims to develop an understanding
of how geographical distance and residency shape private resident and nonresident for-
est owners’ relationships with their forest. By considering the case of two different geo-
graphical contexts in Sweden and through owners’ own experiences, emotions, and
perceptions, the article examines how forest owners residing at varying physical
distances to their forestland construct their sense of place.

**Theoretical Framework**

Conceptually, various definitions of and theoretical approaches to sense of place2 have
been employed. It has been suggested that there are multiple reasons and influences
involved, but there is no real consensus on what the concept of sense of place comprises
or how it is constructed (Farnum, Hall, and Kruger 2005; Convery, Corsane, and Davis
2014). With our emphasis on the spatial distance between private forest owners and
their forests, we aim to discuss this in relation to the influential “early” literature based
in humanistic geography, which regards sense of place as derived from deep personal
experiences and emotional interpretations of locations (Relph 1976; Tuan 1977), as well
as to the “later” literature, which emphasizes how sense of place is constructed through
different social interactions and processes (Massey 1994; Cresswell 2004; Stokowski
2008).

A fundamental point of discussion in the literature on sense of place concerns the
way to relate to distance, or proximity, between people and places. The early literature
on sense of place emphasized the importance of closeness, physical as well as social and
emotional, for people to generate a sense of place. At the heart of this literature lies the
focus on personal experiences and involvement related to places as being keys to creat-
ing the foundation for a sense of place, which includes a sense of deep care, concern,
and responsibility for that place (Relph 1976; Tuan 1977). According to Relph (1976),
an authentic and genuine sense of place comes from individuals experiencing
“insideness,” belonging and feeling at home, which is derived from places where we
were born and grew up, live, or have had significant experiences. The opposite,
“placelessness,” is described as being “outside,” uncommitted and geographically alien-
ated without having significant places. For Relph, authentic sense of place, or familiarity
with a place, is eroded by geographical mobility, such as infrequent visits (ibid). Tuan
(1975) implied that the emotional and physical bonds to places that are required for a
sense of place to evolve have become less possible with globalization. Tuan (1977)
claimed that being close to a place involves combining the meanings of interpersonal intimacy and geographical proximity. Residency, particularly for a long time, enables people to experience and know a place intimately and acquire a sense of the place (Tuan 1977). Thus, sense of place is related to both time and distance. Time affects sense of place because in time we become familiar with a place and acquire a “feel” for it (ibid). Still, Tuan maintained that social distance may indeed be the inverse of geographical distance, and that “psychologically, absence (spatial distance) can make the heart grow fonder” (Tuan 1977, 50).

The above understandings of sense of place have been criticized. The focus on the negative consequences of high mobility and globalization thought to result in weakened ties to places has been rejected as an outdated, false nostalgia for places as enclosed, particular and uniform, and founded on ideas of authentic social relations (Massey 1993, 1994; Harvey 1996). What makes a place special, Massey (1994) argued, is not necessarily any intrinsic qualities of the locale itself: it may also be “the particularity of linkages to that ‘outside’ which is, therefore, itself part of what constitutes the place” (Massey 1994, 155). Instead, Massey emphasized that it is important to recognize the existing differences between people and their relations to places, for example, with respect to distance where different individuals may have different perceptions of “nearness” and “farness,” and interpret the same geographical distance differently (Massey 1994, 2005).

A sense of place, it is argued, should be seen as socially constructed, relational, and part of social interactions and wider social processes (Harvey 1996; Massey 2005; Stokowski 2008). Thus, a place is subject to change since it is continually being defined and redefined by people (Gustafson 2006). Sense of place, then, is learned within a range of social and cultural contexts over time (Derrien and Stokowski 2014), developed collectively (Stokowski 2008) over people’s life courses (Castree 2003) in everyday life (Stokowski 2008), and passed along to others (Eisenhauer, Krannich, and Blahna 2000). The temporal dimension of sense of place implies that places can acquire new meanings over time because people themselves can try to make places “their own,” for example by acquiring knowledge about the place or building social relations in the place (Gustafson 2001). Instead of being regarded as producing negative consequences for sense of place, (increased) mobility can instead be viewed as making it possible to overcome spatial distances and acquire attachment to different places (Gustafson 2006, 2009), or make it possible for people to establish emotional bonds to a place they have only visited or lived in temporarily and on a part-time basis (Kaltenborn and Williams 2002). Instead of the distinctions based on demographic variables and residential status, Kaltenborn and Williams (2002) proposed investigating the diverse ways in which people are tied to places.

**Methods**

A qualitative case study approach was employed to identify and elucidate a broad range of individual private forest owners’ experiences, feelings, and perceptions in order to ensure informative and rich data and understanding (Winchester and Rofe 2010).
Two case study areas in Sweden were selected to provide divergent geographical contexts: Vilhelmina municipality in the northern county of Västerbotten and Hässleholm municipality in the southern county of Skåne (Figure 1). Both municipalities are rural and non-metropolitan, albeit on different scales. The number of inhabitants and population density is several times higher in the southern Hässleholm municipality (approximately 52,000 inhabitants) than in the northern Vilhelmina municipality (nearly 6,800 inhabitants); and whereas Vilhelmina is facing long-term depopulation, the population in Hässleholm has been slowly increasing in the 21st century (Statistics Sweden 2018). As a whole, the forest property sizes are larger in Vilhelmina Municipality than in Hässleholm Municipality, and there is a larger proportion of forest owners residing at a distance from their properties outside Vilhelmina Municipality (such as in the regional centre of Umeå or in and around the capital city of Stockholm) than in Hässleholm Municipality, where owners often reside within the southern county of Skåne.

Figure 1. Case study areas and locations of conducted interviews.
In total, 51 individuals owning forest property in the two municipalities were interviewed by the first author in the first half of 2015 (Table 1). The interviewees were selected purposely to achieve maximum variation in terms of distance between their residence and their forest property, residence in habitations of differing size, size of forest property, and sex of the forest owners. The selection was thus targeted towards capturing diversity and reflecting the range of forest owners in Sweden rather than providing a representative sample (Baxter 2010; Bradshaw and Stratford 2010; Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam 2012). Selection of interviewees was made on the basis of a register (Skogsägarföteckningen from Lantbruksfakta; http://www.lantbruksfakta.se) containing information on forest owners in Sweden by municipality, including name, residential address, date of birth, sex, size of property, and whether the owner is a resident or non-resident of the particular municipality. Information on how the owners acquired their property or length of ownership was not provided in the registry. In developing the sample, we draw upon the definition established by the Swedish Forest Agency of “resident forest owners” as those who reside within the borders of the municipality and “nonresident forest owners” as those who reside in another municipality and to extend this we have chosen to group the owners into four categories according to their place of residence and distance to forest property (see Table 1). The four groups with varying place of residency and distance to forest property (estimated km by road, as defined by the interviewees) were similar in number of interviewees, and within the groups the interviewees varied by age, sex, and size of property. In order to minimize the often biased sample towards men that can be seen in qualitative studies on private forest owners, the selection of interviewees was done with the objective of achieving a nearly equal distribution; hence, we interviewed 25 women and 26 men.

In the resultant sample of interviewees, the age range was 28–75 years, with a mean age of 53 for the northern study area and 55 for the southern one. Most of the interviewees had inherited, received as a gift, or bought their property from a close family member, with duration of ownership ranging from one to more than 50 years, with an

Table 1. Key characteristics of the interviewed private forest owners in the two case study areas (N = 51).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of residence, Resident or nonresident owner, Distance to forest property</th>
<th>North Vilhelmina Municipality</th>
<th>South Håssleholm Municipality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural area, Resident owner Living on, or less than 5 km to forest property</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipality centre (Vilhelmina, Håssleholm), Resident owner Approx. 15–65 km (North), Approx. 5–30 km (South)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional centre (Umeå, Malmö/Lund), Non-resident owner Approx. 230–250 km (North), Approx. 80–100 km (South)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National centre (Stockholm, the capital city of Sweden) Non-resident owner Approx. 680–780 km (North), Approx. 500–530 km (South)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total no. of interviewees with forest property in respective case study area</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
average of about 20 years of ownership. The holdings had often been in the families’ ownership for several generations. The majority of the respondents had (former) residential houses, second homes, or other buildings, such as farmhouses, on their property. Some of the owners in Hässleholm municipality rented out land or residential houses. The size of the properties ranged from about 10 to 800 ha. Although not included as a question in the interview guide, a handful of the owners voluntarily expressed that they were dependent for their income on forestry revenues from their properties. Some of these were farmers and they resided next to their forestland, whereas some were nonresidents.

All interviewees were first contacted via written letter sent by mail, which was followed up by a telephone call to inquire whether the individual was willing to meet for an interview. For those interested in participating, an interview date and time were booked. Of 88 persons initially contacted by telephone, 37 declined to take part in an interview for a variety of reasons, for example, due to a lack of time, sickness, issues related to work or family, or because they perceived that they were not able to contribute much since they were not engaged in, or did not have knowledge about, their forest property. Some who co-owned their property did not want to discuss co-owned land.

The majority of the interviews took place in the home of the owner and some at their workplace or a public venue such as a library or hotel lobby if preferred by the interviewee. The semi-structured open-ended interviews followed an interview guide targeting a range of themes on forest ownership, with a set of questions concerning the forest owners’ experiences, emotions, and perceptions related to the meanings they associated with their forestland. These questions included “feelings of home,” changes over time and ownership, as well as their perceived physical distance/proximity to their property and how they believed their residing proximate or at a distance may influence their relationship with their forest. The average time for an entire interview was 1 h 15 min. All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and, through the use of a qualitative software program, MAXQDA 11, thematically coded by the first author. The aim of the research and the theoretical framework guided the coding and analysis of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). An initial coding list connected to the theoretical pre-understanding was created. Accordingly, repeated patterns of similarities but also diversity in the data were deductively coded into overall themes and sub-themes. In addition, other emerging sub-themes were inductively included, based on interpretations of the interview texts during the coding process (reading, reviewing and revising the codes and the content). The second author developed an early interpretation of the coded data and a first draft of the results, and the first author re-assessed and advanced this analysis while also independently conducting an analysis of the coded data. Brief summaries with selected extracts were made of themes and sub-themes in order to identify their essential points and to form a coherent and valid analytical narrative. The three over-riding analytical themes captured were: (i) “experiencing and feelings of closeness to the forest property,” (iii) “experiencing and feelings of distance related to the forest property,” and (ii) “change, including time and processes influencing sense of place.”

For ethical reasons, the interviewees’ identities have been protected; they are referred to by sex (Female (F) or Male (M)), geographical place of residence (rural, municipality centre, regional centre, national centre), and case study area (north or
south). The first author translated the quotations in the article from the original Swedish to English.

**Results**

This section starts with a brief presentation of the diverse meanings ascribed by the owners to their forests and their perceptions of the physical distance between them and their properties. The rest of the Results section is structured according to the overall themes derived from the data analysis; two parts relate to “closeness,” another to “change,” and the last to “distance.”

**Diversity in Meanings and Perceptions**

The interviews uncovered diversity in the owners’ relationships with their forests, illustrated in the following resident owner’s answer when asked about the meaning of his forest:

> I like to be in the forest, so it’s particularly a place to be in. Also, I see the forest as a producer of raw material, and since we have forest up to our house, you can see the forest and the wildlife, so the forest is a place for wildlife. But, also, the forest gives a certain atmosphere, which I like, and I’ve always liked being in the forest. My father was a hunter and he took me out hunting when I was very small, so I’ve been out in the forest as often I could, my whole life. (M/rural/south)

The different meanings the various owners assigned to their forests were emphasized by many of them as simultaneously forming their sense of place. It was not reflected on that this multitude of different meanings might in any way be an issue or that one aspect influencing sense of place was weak or strong; rather, the components were often expressed as interrelated and complementary, such as the esthetic qualities of the natural environment, recreational activities, and interviewees’ own psychological well-being. Similarly, the interviewees mostly extended their meanings beyond the scale of the physical forest environment to the wider property (although interview questions focused on “the forest” and “the forestland” rather than “the forest property”). The nonresident owners recognized the physical buildings on their property, such as second homes or former residential houses, as influential in forming their sense of place. Multiple activities associated with, and made possible in, the place of their property were also found to be part of constructing a sense of place. Irrespective of distance or residential status, owners performed recreational activities, forestry-related activities, renovation of buildings, or activities intended to enhance the esthetic qualities of their forest property environment.

Different perceptions of “nearness” and “farness” (cf. Massey 1994, 2005) were communicated during the interviews. What owners viewed as being close to or far from their property varied substantially, depending not only on physical distance but also on their own perceptions of “nearness” and “farness.” What counted as close to the property varied: 10 km, “only an hour’s drive,” or being there often made owners perceive “nearness.” Several of the southern nonresident owners living in the regional centres experienced a geographical distance of approximately 100 km as “just right,” and they
visited often or on a part-time basis stayed at their properties. Southern owners residing in the national centre of Stockholm and, especially, northern nonresident owners with their property at longer distances from their residence, perceived the distances to be too great, for example, to have access to them at weekends. They mostly spent time at their properties during holidays. However, the following northern owner residing in Stockholm considered himself because of the good transport possibilities to the area of his property, to reside proximate to his forest, even though it is approximately 750 km away:

It’s easy to get there, just a flight [from Stockholm] to Vilhelmina and then a rented car. It’s far in kilometres but I’m really close to my forest because it’s easy to get there. (M/national centre/north)

**Experiencing Closeness Through Inheritance and Social Interactions**

Forest ownership and having inherited the forest property (as most of the interviewees had done)—and consequently being the recipient of cultural heritage, traditions and ties far back in time—was at the core of many owners’ sense of place, irrespective of where they resided in relation to the land. The property and their ownership of it were part of and enabled their historical family linkages. They described the forest, the property and the local area as being part of not only their own past but also that of their parents and other ancestors. A northern owner, who resided in the regional center, explained that one of the reasons she kept her inherited property was “to maintain her own history.” The interviewees described how their predecessors had cared for and managed the forest, the land and the houses on the property for a long time. They pointed out the long-term thinking and responsibilities related to the forest ownership, and how they themselves aspired to continue to be the custodian of the land in order to be able to hand it over to the next generation, their children. For many, their sense of history extended to the history of the village or rural community surrounding their property.

For owners not residing in the municipality of their forestland, their property facilitated social interactions with family, relatives, and friends in the surrounding areas. Particularly for the northern owners with longer distances to their property, houses on their land served as meeting points for their often geographically scattered family connections during holidays:

We siblings meet and we have a good time, we make excursions; look at the forest a bit. I find it boring to be there alone, so I’m never there by myself. It’s the social company that’s important when I go there. (M/regional centre/north)

Also, due to shared ownership with other family members and activities performed together at the property, both resident and nonresident owners experienced a sense of kinship and affinity, sometimes intergenerational, and this contributed to their sense of place, for example, through a family “feeling proud” of their forest.

In relation to the local community, the ownership of property for both resident and nonresident owners meant, to varying degrees, involvement or engagement locally, such as with formal associations (e.g., private road associations, village associations, or hunting teams etc.). However, while some nonresident owners considered themselves to not
be involved and engaged locally, and others said that they had few or no social interactions outside their family or friends when visiting their property, they anyhow expressed feeling a sense of belonging locally. Other nonresidents mentioned their social connections with neighbors or villagers—both informally in diverse social networks and through participating in locally organized activities and cultural events—as adding to their sense of belonging locally, or to their “strong feeling for the village.” Others articulated that although they resided far away geographically and had done so for many years, the continuance of such social relations made them feel like they had not been gone for long, as in the following quote:

There’s the private road association and there’s the hunting team, and some other activities in the area that we go to. Then it’s natural that you chat with your neighbours. When I go to the local grocery store I always meet someone there who I chat with, so it doesn’t feel like I’ve been away. (M/regional centre/south)

**Feeling Closeness—Both Despite and Because of Distance and Mobility**

Both owners residing proximate to and at a distance articulated their sense of place as deriving from the emotions and meanings associated with the fact that their forest property constituted “a home,” in both a physical and an emotional sense. Resident owners often referred to their feelings of home as being based on long-term connections, having acquired experience and knowledge about the place, and the property as a whole or the forest is a “familiar” place to them. A southern resident forest owner, who had moved from the place of the property at age 16 and after many years away had returned to live in the house she grew up in and to the forestland she co-owned with her siblings, described her feelings in relation to the forest:

I have always been there, since I was a child, and there are certain traditions that are associated with it. … We have a picnic there; have had it every spring since I was small. Therefore, things like that make me feel at home; it’s associated with traditions and something enjoyable. (F/rural/south)

Non-resident owners, in particular, underlined their long-term anchoring and a sense of continuity in the place of their property, such as having been born and raised at the location or spending much of their summers and holidays there in their childhood and youth. They referred to the place as part of their past and their family and connected it to nostalgic memories and remembrances of relatives or other people in the area. They also considered it a place where they could feel secure and relaxed and said the house(s) on their property provided space for recreation, rest and revitalization. Their own mobility, i.e. that they had moved away from their “original” or “old” home (the place of the forest property), was given as the reason they could feel at home in multiple places where they had resided or had second homes. Similarly, some owners residing outside the municipalities of their property framed their emotional sense of their forest property as originating from their mobile lives and said their forest property constituted “a point of gravity” in life for them.

One nonresident owner explained:
It provides a stability in some way, a belonging. To have some kind of fixed point. ... compared to owning shares, which is very impersonal. Therefore, it’s tradition and family. We own this together, my siblings and I, so we have something. (F/national centre/south)

Another interviewee pointed out that although he did not spend much time in the area of his forest property due to the long distance to it, he considered it one of his most important homes. Others stressed that they regarded their property as their “real” home, exemplified by a few men who had never resided adjacent to their northern forest property and now resided in the northern regional centre or in Stockholm. One expressed it as follows:

I was brought up in [X] and have nothing left there since my whole family are now residents of [Y], so the meaning of the forest and the house up there is some kind of connection back in time and also some kind of, well, recreation and safety and home. If I consider a home in the world, I consider the home to be there, very much, even if I’m now a resident of [Y]. That’s where I have my family history, and that’s where I function in a good way. (M/national centre/north)

Geographical distance was not shown to be an inevitable predictor of a weaker relationship with their property. When asked about the geographical distance between themselves and their forestland in relation to sense of place, nonresident owners who considered the distance too far simultaneously expressed that this distance made them long for their property. The following southern owner, residing in Stockholm, expressed such feelings:

I live too far away. But that [perception] is because I like it so much. At the same time, it’s no more than about four hours by train down there, so it’s relatively near anyway. But, yes, I would like to have it about an hour away from me. It would be nice if that was the case, but I can’t say I suffer from it. It’s more that I build up a great longing for it, a love. (M/national centre/south)

Other “distant” forest owners argued that the physical distance to their property enhanced their bonds and emotional sentiment:

I believe the bonds strengthen, actually, with distance. The closer you get, the thinner the bonds get because they’re so taken-for-granted. They’re not if you live 550 km away; then they’re not so obvious. Then it takes a lot. (M/national centre/south)

Because they had inherited their property and had a strong interest in it, other interviewees noted that distance did not play a significant role:

No matter where I live I have the same view, I think. It’s still my heritage, or my roots. I don’t think I see it differently if I’m close or I’m here. I don’t think so. (F/national centre/south)

**Changes in Ownership and Place: Changes in Sense of Place?**

A number of owners had experienced changes related to their sense of place since they had become the owner, partly due to the increased responsibility and involvement that came with the ownership. Both resident and nonresident owners associated this with enhanced positive feelings, and several stated that they had been socialized early on into their relationships with their property and forest, especially by elder generations of men
(fathers, grandfathers). They referred to the various meanings of the forest environment described earlier as well as the management of it. Those that specifically emphasized that they were “born into” their forest ownership were mainly rural-based owners, but some who resided in urban areas outside of the municipalities also felt this. While some said that these close feelings they had acquired had not changed, many acknowledged that with age and over their life course, and at times facilitated by increased knowledge and experience related to their property, their feelings had deepened. In addition, with age and as they had children of their own, they had developed more thoughts about their own roots linked to their property as well as about the future. A southern nonresident owner residing in one of the regional centres, for example, stated that he had noticed that his children, as they aged and had their own children, had changed their view from not being interested in spending time at the forest property to a situation in which it was necessary for them “to queue” to go there.

A topic raised by both resident and nonresident owners was the differences in sense of place between previous generations, who had often been dependent on income from the forest and therefore valued it mainly for its economic returns, and their own generation who were more economically independent of incomes from the forest and therefore appreciated more the mental, social, and natural components of their property. For example, some southern nonresident owners recognized that esthetic and recreation qualities were more pronounced among new owners. However, although some interviewees felt they had a completely different sense of place than the previous generation of owners, several concluded that theirs had been formed by their parents’ or grandparents’. Also, a few mentioned that they tried to pass on their own sense of place to their children.

For some owners, changes of the rural place itself had altered their sense of place. Societal transformations, such as depopulation and a negative economic development in the rural areas, were frequent topics among the northern owners, and particularly the resident owners were affected by these changes in various ways. In addition, the issue of nonresident forest owners was brought up in connection to the changes in the rural areas in the north. For example, a northern owner residing in the municipality centre claimed that too many nonresidents who moved to urban areas kept their properties instead of selling them to locals, who instead could be residing in these houses. He maintained that their “love for their home areas is wiping out the villages.”

Distance: Geographical, Social and Temporal

Out of the 51 interviewees, three nonresident owners from Stockholm with co-owned forestland in the north had never visited their forestland (which did not include houses). They stated that they had no emotional involvement with the property although one implied that it was an inheritance from her father and therefore she did not want to sell it. They had all spent time in their childhood and youth in family houses near the property, which had formed positive memories for them. Furthermore, statements from owners who expressed feelings of distance to their forest properties often related them to their social circumstances and the issue of “time.” Some recent owners had not developed social contacts or become integrated into the local social
context of their property. An interviewee residing in the northern municipality centre noted that he sensed he was part of “a new generation” of forest owners in the location of his forest and therefore had not been able to join the local hunting team there, an important social feature that is associated with forest ownership. A female owner in the south residing in the municipality centre drew comparisons between her feelings for two different properties she owned: the “old” property was instilled with sentiments from her social relationships there, such as with the local hunting team, whereas she had “no sentimental feelings” towards the “new” one. Others concluded that it could take years to root yourself at the property after becoming an owner. Owners who had long ago moved away from the location of their property could socially feel like strangers there because the social setting had changed during this time; for example, important people in their lives such as family members, relatives or friends had died or moved away. “Distance-home” was what one northern nonresident owner called his state of mind, as part of his heart was still in his previous home area, and at the same time he felt socially alienated there and therefore he no longer felt at home. There were also those who, although they had grown up in the area of their property, felt more at home in their urban homes due to time spent and social networks developed there.

The ownership itself was mentioned as a reason for experiencing a distant relationship. Some nonresidents considered that sharing their forest property with others through co-ownership reduced their engagement with the property. Only a few (nonresident as well as resident owners residing adjacent to their property or in a municipality centre) expressed less or no engagement or interest in the property; and argued that being a forest owner was just something they had become through inheritance, and that they owned it because “I have to.” The focus was mainly here on the forest, and the many responsibilities included in owning a forest were experienced as a burden or something they were not interested in. Ambivalence towards the property was expressed by a nonresident woman who had inherited her property from her husband. With no own background of her own in the area, she did not feel at home there socially speaking, and she saw herself as a “middleman” between her late husband and their children, who would ultimately inherit the land.

Both resident and nonresident owners voiced concerns about their children who resided in urban areas at a distance showed no interest in the forest property. Nonresident owners’ reflections evolved around the issue that it might be difficult to transfer their property, given that their children did not have the same home feelings for or nostalgic memories of the place that those who once had resided there had. An interviewee reflected on being a nonresident:

I believe it would have been different if we had been residents there. The children would have had a completely different relationship, I think, to the forest as well, because then you would have been with them in the forest more ... We are not part of the local community, in the relationships there, in the way that those who have been living there, or have lived closer than us. We are a bit like summer guests. (F/regional centre/north)

Relph’s (1976) conception of “insiders” and “outsiders” was endorsed by some northern resident owners, who perceived that the geographical distance between nonresident owners and their property resulted in “another type” of relationship, for instance:
They can never get the same feeling for it ... they can long for it, they can enjoy being there, but they don’t live in it. It’s a substantial difference to live in it. (M/rural/north)

Some nonresident owners, and residents living in municipality centres confirmed the resident owners’ concerns, one of them noting that the alienation grows with geographical distance because of difficulties to bond emotionally with the property:

Obviously, if you had been living in the place you might emphasise the spiritual part more. Now you try to find a certain line of being rational in your actions, and you may think differently and maybe use it differently compared to if you live on the property. (M/ municipality centre/south)

In contrast, other owners residing at a geographical distance stressed that they did not focus on the economic income and logging because if they did their sense of place would be lost. They instead remarked that resident owners, because of their dependence on the income from the forest, had a more economically rational approach than they themselves did, who “could afford” to have a “more sentimental” relationship with the land.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

By examining how Swedish private forest owners residing at varying geographical distances to their forest property construct their sense of place, this study contributes to an understanding of the increasingly diverse forest owner corps (with growing numbers of nonresident owners) and their relationship to their forestland. In particular, the different ways in which owners experience closeness to or distance from their properties show that sense of place is more complex than merely about geographical distance and residential status.

When used as a frame in the qualitative analysis, the concept of sense of place highlights the forest owners’ experiences and meanings of their forest properties as subjective places that do not only encompass the natural forest environment or the owners’ physical bonds to the property. Regardless of geographical distance or residency, this study demonstrates that the properties signify significant personal, social, and historical connections and involvements that are embedded in the particular setting of the property. A sense of place is often generated on the basis that the property and the surrounding rural areas is or has been a place of residence, part of a long family history, or it has been inherited (cf. Jørgensen and Stjernström 2008, Markowski-Lindsay et al. 2016). Drawing on the sense of place literature, this study does not only demonstrate forest owners’ personal experiences and interpretations (cf. Relph 1976; Tuan 1977) related to their forestland but it also enhances the understanding of their ties to their properties as constructed through social interactions, contexts, and processes over time, in accordance with the social constructionist approach (cf. Stokowski 2008). Sense of place was gained by the interviewees early in life, being learned between generations, changed or developed through acquiring ownership, with age, over the life course, as well as being created out of memories. Wider social processes (cf. Massey 1994; Harvey 1996) such as rural change, including depopulation and negative economic development, were also recognized in this study as contributing to alterations in sense of place. This study supports the importance of time in shaping people’s sense of place (e.g.,
as well as the recognition that sense of place is formed through a combination of various influences. As a result, this study indicates that independent of being a resident or a nonresident, owners’ feelings for their properties are not static, but over time they are subject to reconstruction through diverse social experiences, circumstances, and contexts.

How, then, does geographical distance and residency shape the forest owners’ sense of place? The results show a mixed picture. For some owners, not residing on the property itself, living far away, and spending time away from it resulted in experiencing distant feelings or a changed sense of place with respect to the forest property. Also, the differences in the case study contexts, whereby northern owners resided further away from their properties than the southern owners, contributed to some owners’ experiencing distance to their forestland. However, as this study illustrates, physical distance or proximity and residency could not readily or alone explain forest owners’ feelings of distance or closeness (cf. Kaltenborn & Williams 2002). The study suggests that the owners construct their feelings of closeness or distance to their properties from a variety of sources and that these are changeable. In particular, we identified the social and ownership contexts, i.e., the social settings and interactions, and the circumstances of ownership—in combination and/or over time—as instrumental in both feeling distance and closeness. For many owners, a sense of belonging, home, continuity, kinship, custodianship, stability, and well-being was derived from their social and ownership contexts. Others’ sense of place were, within their personal contexts, characterized by feelings of social alienation, ambivalence, no engagement or interest, as well as experiencing ownership of forests as a burden. With this diversity in mind of how sense of place, and feelings of distance or closeness, were socially constructed among the forest owners (and with consideration to this limited qualitative interview study), we could not observe clear-cut similarities or differences between the resident and nonresident groups or the categories within. Thus, rather than generalizing because of geographical distance or residency, this study highlights the multiple realities of the existing forest owners corps in Sweden.

However, while not implying that physical distance or non-residency are unimportant, our results do nonetheless raise a question concerning the requirement for a person to have both geographical proximity and social intimacy (e.g., Tuan 1977) in order to feel closeness to a place. The findings of the present study complicate the arguments that residency and “insideness” are salient for a sense of place and that geographical mobility is not conducive to having a “feel” for the place (Relph 1976; Tuan 1977). Rather, the results suggest that mobility can bridge spatial distances and that people can develop close emotional ties with several places (cf. Gustafson 2006) or places that they have only visited or lived in on a part-time basis (cf. Kaltenborn & Williams 2002). Feelings of “home” in the place of their property were identified by both resident and nonresident owners, but nonresident owners, in particular, emphasized their emotional anchoring. These “distant” owners did not regard their own mobile lives as restricting their sense of place; on the contrary, their sense of place was influenced by their mobility, and for this reason, their property could constitute a sense of stability and continuity. In fact, some owners residing far away perceived that absence “can make the heart grow fonder” (cf. Tuan 1977, 50). Consequently, the findings indicate that distant places outside the permanent residency for private forest owners can also give a sense of
belonging and safety (cf. Manzo 2003). In particular, we found that the physical houses located on the property, such as second homes or former residential buildings, proved to be important to nonresident forest owners’ sense of place because they facilitated their visits and therefore supported their social and historical relationships with and at the property, such as with family, friends, and the local community (cf. Nordlund and Westin 2011). Drawing on research on second homes, second-home owners can have higher levels of attachment to a place than year-round residents or tourists, as they often both have long-term ties and experience significant social relationships there (Stedman 2006). Thus, the concerns to successful generational transfer (cf. Creighton, Blatner, and Carroll 2015) by some owners of both forest ownership and a sense of place to new generations residing in urban areas could be discussed in light of the suggestion that new generations are likely to form dissimilar relationships than previous generations with their properties, for instance—as reported by the interviewees in this study—transforming houses from permanent dwellings into second homes and thereby facilitating a sense of home (cf. Flemsaeter 2009). In this way, forest owners residing at a distance might not experience a “weaker” (or indeed a “stronger”) relation with their forest property in comparison to resident owners or perceive themselves as being “outsiders” in the way that some northern resident owners perceived them. Rather, they may experience another kind of relationship based on a sense of place constructed in and from their specific context as nonresidents, such as being second homeowners and not dependent on their forestland for their livelihood.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the complexity in assuming an “insider-outsider,” dichotomous distinction (cf. Relph 1976) and that geographical distance, or residency, alone can explain variations in sense of place in the context of private forest ownership. Viewing sense of place as socially constructed and changeable makes it possible to understand the diverse ways in which owners are tied to their properties, and how these ties may alter with time, circumstances, and contexts. The study has shown how physical distance, non-residency, and mobility may generate not only feelings of distance but how it can also nurture emotional closeness and feelings of belonging among nonresident owners. Thus, irrespective of geographical distance or residency, it is important to take into account the fact that forest owners do not simply possess forest environments or financial assets but that they are owners of places instilled with a variety of social and historical connections, which significantly shape their relationships to their forestland in various ways. Future research on the relationships between geographical proximity, mobility, and sense of place could delve further into the importance of particular social linkages, connectedness, and involvement extending beyond property boundaries for forest owners’ sense of place (cf. Massey 1994), such as to local rural communities and family ties. Although we cannot assume a linear relationship between sense of place and behavior from the findings in this study, we nonetheless maintain that this research points to the need for policy-makers and practitioners to design relevant policies and programs concerning private forest owners—for example, related to forest management, public land use planning for nature protection and recreation, information and extension programs—that sincerely incorporate a deep understanding of the plurality in forest owners, their contexts, and the influences that together construct their sense of place.
Notes

1. In this article, we use the term “private forest owners,” which is synonymous with the often-used definition “non-industrial forest owners”; i.e., owners are “non-industrial in their land ownership goals and behavior because by definition they do not directly own processing facilities and their principal responsibilities are not to stockholders” (Kittredge 2005, 673).

2. Sense of place has often been used interchangeably with place attachment, which focuses on the positive emotional bond people have to a place, whereas sense of place is considered to provide a more holistic understanding of subjective qualities, including negative or neutral sense of place. Place attachment is used primarily in the academic field of environmental psychology and in tourist research, often measuring different components, whereas sense of place is more grounded in human geography and more qualitative in character (Williams and Vaske 2003; Convery, Corsane, and Davis 2014; Beidler and Morrison 2015). In social science natural resource research, both concepts have been used.

3. See Sorice, Rajala, and Kreuter (2018) for similar conclusions related to a quantitative study on absentee landowners in the US.

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