

Building Environmental Intentions through Community and Place: Evidence from Prospect Park

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Abstract

Urban parks provide important environmental, recreational, and social benefits for local communities. Understanding the factors that encourage residents to engage in environmentally responsible behaviors is therefore important for sustainable urban park management. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships among community attachment, place attachment to the park, and environmentally responsible behavioral intention among residents living near Prospect Park in Brooklyn, New York. Data were collected from 220 residents using online and offline surveys and analyzed using reliability analysis, exploratory factor analysis, and regression analysis. The results indicated that community attachment positively influenced place attachment to the park. In addition, place attachment to the Prospect park increased environmentally responsible behavioral intention. These findings suggest that residents who feel a stronger sense of belonging to their community are more likely to develop emotional bonds with local parks, which in turn encourages environmentally responsible behavioral intentions. The study highlights the importance of strengthening both community connections and park-related experiences to promote environmental sustainability in urban park settings.

Keywords: community attachment, place attachment, environmentally responsible behavioral intention, urban parks, Prospect Park

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Introduction

Background and Rationale

Urban parks play an important role in enhancing both environmental quality and community well-being in large cities. In addition to providing recreational opportunities, urban parks contribute to environmental sustainability by improving air quality, supporting biodiversity, and reducing stormwater runoff. They also serve as valuable social spaces where residents can exercise, relax, interact with others, and temporarily escape the stress of urban life. For many people, urban parks become meaningful places that are closely connected to their daily lives and experiences.

Prospect Park in Brooklyn, New York, is one of the most important urban parks in the city and serves both environmental and social functions for surrounding neighborhoods (Pratt Institute, n.d.). The park provides opportunities for walking, cycling, sports participation, picnicking, and community events, while also offering access to natural environments within a densely populated urban area. Because many local residents visit the park regularly, Prospect Park represents more than a recreational facility; it is a place where people develop memories, experiences, and personal connections.

Given the important role of urban parks in supporting both community life and environmental sustainability, understanding the factors that encourage residents to develop strong bonds with local parks and engage in environmentally responsible behavior has become increasingly important. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationships among community attachment, place attachment toward Prospect Park, and environmentally responsible behavioral intention among community residents living near Prospect Park in Brooklyn, New York.

Community Attachment and Place Attachment

Place attachment refers to the emotional, symbolic, and functional bonds that individuals develop with specific places through repeated experiences and meaningful interactions (Williams & Vaske, 2003). Individuals often become attached to places that provide positive experiences, social connections, and a sense of comfort or belonging (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). In urban settings, neighborhood parks can become important places that support psychological well-being and foster emotional connections between residents and their local environment (Zhao et al., 2024).

A related concept is community attachment, which refers to individuals' emotional connection, sense of belonging, and identification with their local community. Residents who experience stronger attachment to their community tend to exhibit higher levels of social integration and engagement with local places and resources (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; Lewicka, 2011). While place attachment focuses on a particular physical setting, community attachment reflects residents' connections with the people, social relationships, and overall community in which they live. Individuals with strong community attachment are generally more likely to feel connected to local resources and to value places that contribute to community life. Therefore, residents who feel attached to their community may also be more likely to develop stronger attachment to important community spaces such as Prospect Park. Based on this rationale, the following hypothesis was proposed:

Hypothesis 1. *Community attachment will positively influence place attachment toward Prospect Park.*

Place Attachment and Environmentally Responsible Behavior

Place attachment may further encourage environmentally responsible behavior (ERB). Environmentally responsible behavior refers to actions intended to protect the environment and reduce negative environmental impacts. Previous studies have shown that individuals who feel emotionally connected to natural and recreational settings are more likely to support environmental protection and engage in pro-environmental behaviors (Halpenny, 2010). More recent research has demonstrated that place attachment serves as an important mechanism linking environmental attitudes and environmentally responsible behaviors among park visitors (Yoon et al., 2024). Similarly, Maricchiolo et al. (2021) reported that stronger place attachment was associated with higher levels of pro-environmental behavior. When people feel that a place is personally meaningful, they are often more willing to protect and preserve it.

Although previous studies have examined the relationships among community attachment, place attachment, and environmentally responsible behavior, relatively little research has focused specifically on urban park settings and nearby community residents. Given the important environmental and social functions of urban parks, understanding these relationships may provide valuable implications for urban park management and community-based sustainability initiatives. Accordingly, the following hypothesis was proposed:

Hypothesis 2. *Place attachment toward Prospect Park will positively influence environmentally responsible behavioral intention.*

Methods

Participants and Data Collection

This study employed a convenience sampling method to collect data from residents living near Prospect Park in Brooklyn, New York. Both online and offline survey methods were utilized to increase accessibility and participation. A total of 220 usable questionnaires were collected, including 143 online responses and 77 offline responses. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and voluntarily agreed to participate prior to completing the survey. Data collection was conducted among adult residents who had experience visiting or using Prospect Park. As shown in Table 1, the sample consisted predominantly of female participants (70.9%), while 24.1% identified as male and 2.3% as non-binary. Most participants (67.7%) had completed a graduate or professional degree, followed by 24.1% with a bachelor's degree. Regarding annual household income, 37.7% reported earning \$200,000 or more, whereas 27.7% reported incomes between \$100,000 and \$199,999. In terms of park visitation frequency, the largest proportion of participants (37.7%) reported visiting Prospect Park 10 or more times per month, followed by 27.3% who visited the park 1–2 times per month.

Measures

The survey instrument consisted of three primary constructs: community attachment, place attachment, and environmentally responsible behavioral intention. All measurement items were adapted from Larson et al. (2018). Community attachment was assessed using items measuring participants' emotional connection, sense of belonging, and identification with their local community. Place attachment toward Prospect Park was measured using items assessing participants' emotional and symbolic bonds with the park. Environmentally responsible behavioral intention was measured using items evaluating participants' intentions to engage in behaviors that support environmental conservation and sustainability. All items were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree").

Table 1. Participants' Characteristics.

Characteristic	Category	<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Female	156	70.9
	Male	53	24.1
	Non-binary	5	2.3
	Missing	6	2.8
Education Level	High school or under	4	1.8
	Some college	12	5.5
	Bachelor's degree	53	24.1
	Graduate or Professional Degree	149	67.7
Household Income	Less than \$50,000	20	9.1
	\$50,000–\$99,999	35	15.9
	\$100,000–\$199,999	61	27.7
	\$200,000 or more	83	37.7
	Missing	21	9.5
Monthly Park Visits	1–2 times/month	60	27.3
	3–5 times/month	42	19.1
	6–9 times/month	31	14.1
	≥10 times/month	83	37.7
	Missing	4	1.8
Total		220	100.0

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, exploratory factor analysis, and regression analyses were conducted using SPSS version 29. Reliability coefficients ranged from .87 to .92, indicating satisfactory internal consistency (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Exploratory factor analysis supported construct validity, with factor loadings ranging from .50 to .87 (Hair et al., 2019). To test the proposed hypotheses, simple regression analyses were performed examining: (a) the effect of community attachment on place attachment and (b) the effect of place attachment on environmentally responsible behavioral intention.

Results

Reliability and Validity

The results of the reliability analysis indicated acceptable internal consistency for all constructs. Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from .87 to .92, exceeding the recommended threshold of .70. In addition, exploratory factor analysis supported the validity of the measurement model, with all factor loadings exceeding the recommended cutoff value.

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and reliability estimates for the study variables. Community attachment showed the highest mean score ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.77$), followed by environmentally responsible behavior ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.82$), and place attachment ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 0.49$). All constructs demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency reliability.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability.

Variable	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
Community Attachment	4.17	0.77	.87
Place Attachment	2.10	0.49	.92
Environmentally Responsible Behavior	3.14	0.82	.87

Hypothesis Testing

To examine the proposed relationships among the study variables, a series of simple regression analyses were conducted. The results are presented in Table 3.

Hypothesis 1 proposed that community attachment would positively influence place attachment toward Prospect Park. The regression analysis indicated that community attachment significantly predicted place attachment ($\beta = .36$, $p < .01$). The model explained 11.0% of the variance in place attachment ($R^2 = .11$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that place attachment would positively influence environmentally responsible behavioral intention. The regression analysis demonstrated that place attachment significantly predicted environmentally responsible behavioral intention ($\beta = .25$, $p < .05$). The model explained 5.0% of the variance in environmentally responsible behavioral intention ($R^2 = .05$). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Table 3. Results of Regression Analyses.

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	SE	β	t	p	R^2
Place Attachment	Community Attachment	.08	.36	3.12	.003	.11
Environmentally Responsible Behavior	Place Attachment	.29	.25	2.10	.039	.05

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships among community attachment, place attachment toward Prospect Park, and environmentally responsible behavioral intention among local residents in Brooklyn, New York. The findings supported both proposed hypotheses and provide meaningful implications for urban park management and environmental sustainability initiatives.

First, the results indicated that community attachment positively influenced place attachment toward Prospect Park. This finding suggests that residents who feel emotionally connected to their local community are more likely to develop stronger emotional and symbolic bonds with nearby urban parks. Because Prospect Park functions as an important community space for recreation, social interaction, and daily leisure experiences, residents with stronger community attachment may perceive the park as an extension of their community identity. This result is consistent with previous research emphasizing the interconnected nature of social and spatial attachment processes. Specifically, Scannell and Gifford (2010) proposed that place attachment develops through interactions among people, places, and social experiences, suggesting that community-based social connections can contribute to stronger emotional bonds with meaningful places. The present findings support this perspective by demonstrating that attachment to the local community may serve as an important foundation for developing attachment to nearby urban parks.

Second, place attachment significantly influenced environmentally responsible behavioral intention. Residents who reported stronger attachment toward Prospect Park were more likely to express intentions to engage in environmentally responsible behaviors. This finding supports prior studies suggesting that emotional bonds with recreational and natural environments can motivate individuals to protect and preserve those environments. In particular, Halpenny (2010) found that park visitors with stronger place attachment were more likely to support environmental protection and engage in pro-environmental behaviors. Similarly, Yoon et al. (2024) demonstrated that place attachment serves as an important psychological mechanism linking environmental attitudes and pro-environmental behavior among urban park visitors. Consistent with these findings, the present study suggests that residents who feel emotionally connected to Prospect Park are more likely to express intentions to engage in behaviors that support environmental sustainability.

However, the relatively low proportion of explained variance suggests that place attachment alone may not fully account for environmentally responsible behavioral intention. Other factors, such as environmental values, environmental concern, ecological knowledge, social norms, or prior environmental experiences, may also play important roles in shaping residents' intentions to engage in environmentally responsible behaviors. Future research should incorporate additional psychological and social variables to develop a more comprehensive understanding of environmental behavior in urban park settings. Additionally, future studies should investigate how the prevalence of group-based activities, relative to solitary park use, influences community cohesion and place attachment. Quantifying social interactions within parks may provide valuable insights into the mechanisms through which public green spaces strengthen social ties and promote community well-being.

Taken together, these findings provide important theoretical and practical implications for understanding environmentally responsible behavior in urban park settings. Theoretically, the findings extend previous place attachment research by demonstrating that attachment to the local community precedes and facilitates attachment to a specific urban park. While previous studies have primarily emphasized the direct influence of place attachment on environmentally responsible behavior, the present study highlights the importance of community attachment as an upstream social resource that indirectly supports pro-environmental intentions through stronger emotional bonds with local parks.

From a practical and policy perspective, municipalities and park management agencies should prioritize community-based programs that encourage repeated social interaction within parks, such as neighborhood volunteer programs, citizen stewardship initiatives, environmental education workshops, and local cultural events. These initiatives may strengthen residents' attachment to both their community and urban parks, thereby promoting long-term environmental stewardship.

Despite these practical implications, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the use of convenience sampling may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the cross-sectional design prevents the establishment of causal relationships among variables. Future research should address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs and more representative sampling approaches to further examine the relationships among community attachment, place attachment, and environmentally responsible behavior in urban park settings. Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating the important roles of community attachment and place attachment in promoting environmentally responsible behavioral intention among urban park users. The findings highlight the value of integrating social and environmental perspectives in urban park management and sustainability research.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationships among community attachment, place attachment toward Prospect Park, and environmentally responsible behavioral intention among community residents in Brooklyn, New York. The findings revealed that community attachment positively influenced place attachment, and that place attachment, in turn, positively influenced environmentally responsible behavioral intention. These results suggest that residents' emotional connections to both their community and local urban parks play important roles in encouraging pro-environmental intentions. By demonstrating the link between social attachment and environmental behavior within an urban park context, this study contributes to a better understanding of how community-based relationships can support environmental sustainability. The findings further suggest that urban park management strategies aimed at strengthening community engagement and fostering meaningful park experiences may help promote both stronger place attachment and environmentally responsible behaviors among residents.

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