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Eye on the Environment

### **“This I Believe”**

by Cori Stanek, Northwest Connections

The need to belong.

The desire to belong somewhere is strong when you're young, when social circles are of critical importance—seemingly crucial to your very existence and remarkably dramatic.

As you grow older, that sense of need transfers to a larger community encompassing those you work with, your neighbors, and the town in which you live. The need to belong is strong but subtle, driving individual action and shaping communities. Yet the need to belong finds true power in its ability to connect people with a landscape.

Simone Weil, French author and social critic, wrote in her book *The Need for Roots* that “To be rooted is perhaps the most important but least understood need of the human soul.” Indeed, the necessity of a deeply seeded connection to a community and a landscape can often be overlooked, but it is this sense of place that enriches our lives so deeply.

“Sense of Place” has become a buzz phrase for the environmental and conservation movements but it finds its roots in the writings and philosophies of social pillars like Henry David Thoreau, Mark Twain, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold. Cultivating a sense of place is about learning a landscape and placing one's self within it—identifying with one's home or where they find themselves.

Never before have I been witness to greater sense of place within a community than in the Seeley-Swan. I spent this past summer with

Northwest Connections as their summer intern. Hailing from Minnesota I understood a community that took pride in its Scandinavian eccentricities, modernly popularized by Garrison Keillor and films like *Fargo*, but never before had I been a part of a community that was so deeply tied to and familiar with a landscape.

In the Seeley-Swan, the land is recognized as a *part* of the community, not only the community's home but also a rich part of its history, its livelihood, and future—and it is its future that is most concerning.

One of my very first projects as the Northwest Connections intern was to assist with a community presentation of submissions from the first Swan Lands Photo Contest. What struck me during the evening presentation of these snapshots of the Seeley-Swan was not so much the photos themselves or the locations where they were taken, but the reaction of the crowd to each photograph.

With each successive turn of a slide oohs and ahhs moved through the crowd, laughter, and the rapid sharing of memories and stories from the places depicted in the photographs. It was in that moment I knew this was a community that possessed a remarkable sense of history and place.

Living in the Swan this summer also allowed me to attend a broad array of community meetings. There were discussions on ecological restoration, community council meetings, landholders meetings, planning meetings, the list goes on, but the central theme of most all of those gatherings was a concern for the future of this place.

Whether it be ecologically motivated, culturally minded, or economically concerned, this community undoubtedly wants to preserve their place—mobilizing of a sense of place that is all together inspiring.

To a young person, about to graduate from college and move into the “real world,” it is nearly overwhelming to know that communities like the Seeley-Swan exist. Sounds odd I know,

but to someone from a generation that is looking down the road at a warming world, a distressing energy crisis, economic instability, and the loss of land, it is inspiring and motivating to know that work has already begun, that communities like the Seeley-Swan are already looking down that same road and mobilizing, together, to find a way to preserve the places that they love.

I was recently reading from a collection of essays published in association with NPR's "This I Believe" project and came across an essay by sixteen year old Josh Rittenberg titled "Tomorrow Will Be a Better Day."

In his essay Josh talks about his parent's concern for his generation and the world that they will inherit, but Josh's outlook for his generation's future was remarkably optimistic. Looking back on the accomplishments of his grandparents' and parents' generations (the end of two world wars, the development of the polio vaccine, and the passage of civil rights) he expressed hope for accomplishments of similar magnitude for this generation. He wrote quite plainly, "...the world that my generation grows into is going to get better, not worse."

The essay got me thinking, and recognizing my own belief in hope for lasting community and a sense of place for my own home and for the northwest Montana valley that I have fallen in love with over the past summer and fall.

Josh's essay put into simple and eloquent terms my desire, and the desire of many my age, to step up and continue fighting for places like the Seeley-Swan.

This summer brought exciting developments in the conservation of community and landscape in the Seeley-Swan with a vigorous push to promote bear awareness, the establishment and growth of a community-based food culture, continued learning from management projects like Holland-Pierce, and the hopeful and invigorating promise of conservation and continued land-use through the Montana Legacy Project, just to name a few. The Seeley-Swan is getting better, not worse.

I believe in the simplicity of Josh's hopeful stance. The struggle of generations past, and groundwork being laid today, is monumentally important to the success of the future.

The Seeley-Swan valley is blessed in its rich sense of place, its connection to community, landscape, and history—attributes that have not gone unnoticed by the coming generation. Conservation of a place and a lifestyle happens by cumulative and collaborative effort, and it's already started in a remarkable little valley in Northwest Montana.