Deep Roots, Rotten Fruit: Elitism, Power, and Economic Development in Appalachian Ohio

Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Sara Frances Nicholson, B.S.
Graduate Program in Geography

The Ohio State University
2010

Thesis Committee

Dr. Kendra McSweeney, Advisor

Dr. Linda Lobao

Dr. Edward Malecki
ABSTRACT

As North America has undergone a shift from an industrial to a post-industrial society, the rural landscapes devastated by industrial activity (i.e. resource extraction) have begun a transition as well (ODNR 2010). In Southeast Ohio, an economically depressed and formerly environmentally degraded region, this transition can be seen in a gradual forest recovery, or “regreening” (Mather 1992). This regreening process and the decline of the extractive industry have led to a diversification of the Appalachian Ohio economy. Local people have taken advantage of the changing landscape, reasserted a claim on their region, and are pursuing alternative means of economic opportunity.

This research focuses on one local initiative that exemplifies local people attempting to create a positive alternative future for their region, The Ohio Outback project. The Ohio Outback project is an initiative based on unifying Appalachian Ohio under a single brand in order to market the region more widely as a tourism destination. Through an analysis of the Ohio Outback project and its leaders, this thesis offers a rich narrative about rural economic development, connection to place, and the challenges of place-based initiatives. This thesis also addresses themes of local power and elitism in a rural America, a setting often not associated with those ideas. Through a study on the agency of rural people, this research
presents a much more complex and conflicted situation than might be expected in the “backwards” countryside of Appalachian Ohio.

This thesis tells a unique dual story, first explaining why the Outback program should likely have succeeded based on previous evidence from McSweeney and McChesney (2004) and three other major bodies of literature: innovation diffusion, political ecology, and sense of place. These three literatures, which rarely reference one another, are used in tandem to create the theoretical background of this research and explain the processes occurring in places like Appalachian Ohio. Next, evidence is presented that illustrates that the Ohio Outback project has seen little success in the region. An analysis of this evidence reveals that the complexity of regional collaboration, the inability to reach consensus on a brand for the region, and the zealousness and suspected corruption of Outback leaders resulted in a failure of the initiative to unite Appalachian Ohio under a singular moniker.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to my advisor, Dr. Kendra McSweeney. Her encouragement, willingness to talk through multiple research ideas, and support throughout the master’s degree and thesis writing process were invaluable. She is an exemplary advisor and a professional inspiration. I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to work with Dr. McSweeney. I would also like to extend my gratitude to my other committee members, Dr. Linda Lobao and Dr. Edward Malecki. My thanks go to Dr. Lobao for introducing me rural sociology and innovation diffusion literatures. Her enthusiasm was evident in her teaching, and I appreciate Dr. Lobao’s encouragement to publish and pursue a doctoral degree. Finally, my gratitude goes to Dr. Malecki for taking an interest in my work and willingly serving on my committee on short notice. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Malecki’s always-collegial attitude and his literal ‘open door’ policy that encourages interaction between students and faculty.

I would also like to express my thanks to my colleagues within the geography department, particularly Zoe Pearson, Chris Hartmann, and Justine Law. We had a unique opportunity to be a part of a small cohort as Dr. McSweeney’s advisees and provide support for one another, particularly at the beginning of the program. I am
forever grateful for their friendship and patience with me as I adjusted to life in a new place and as we all learned to adapt to the graduate school lifestyle.

My sincere gratitude goes to my family, friends, and my fiancé, Patrick. I am so thankful for their constant support and love. Patrick truly provided me sanity in the most difficult moments of this process.

Finally, I would like to extend my thanks to the people I encountered in southeast Ohio. I appreciate their welcoming nature and willingness to tell their personal stories for this research. Traveling in southeast Ohio was a breath of fresh air for me, and I appreciate the local people who helped me begin to understand their ‘place.’
VITA

May 2008 .............................. B.S. Geography, The University of Southern Mississippi

2008-Present ........................ Graduate Teaching Associate, The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Geography
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .............................................................................................................................................. ii
Acknowledgements .............................................................................................................................. iv
Vita ........................................................................................................................................................... vi
Table of Contents ................................................................................................................................... vii
List of Figures ......................................................................................................................................... ix

Chapters:

1. Introduction .......................................................................................................................................... 1
   1.1 Research Topic ................................................................................................................................. 1
   1.2 Object of Research ............................................................................................................................. 4
   1.3 Methods .............................................................................................................................................. 6
   1.4 Structure of the Thesis ....................................................................................................................... 11

2. Appalachian Ohio ................................................................................................................................. 13
   2.1 Introduction to Appalachian Ohio ...................................................................................................... 13
   2.2 Coal Mining in Appalachian Ohio ..................................................................................................... 15
   2.3 People, Poverty and Progress in Appalachian Ohio ........................................................................... 17
   2.4 Diversification of the Appalachian Ohio Economy ........................................................................... 20
   2.5 Hocking College—A Community Institution .................................................................................... 25
   2.6 “The Ohio Outback” Initiative ........................................................................................................... 31

3. Conceptual Framework ............................................................................................................................ 35
   3.1 Conceptual Approach .......................................................................................................................... 35
   3.2 Diffusion of Innovations—Ideas on the Move .................................................................................... 36
   3.3 Political Ecology—Conflict Over Landscape ...................................................................................... 41
   3.4 Deep Roots: Sense of Place as a Powerful Motivator .................................................................. 43
   3.5 Summary of Literature ....................................................................................................................... 48

4. Rotten Fruit: Understanding the Non-Success of the Ohio Outback ....................................................... 50
   4.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 50
   4.2 Community Dissent in Public Forums ................................................................................................. 50
   4.3 Lack of Progress at Hocking College .................................................................................................. 52
   4.4 Ohio Outback Ventures Beyond the College ....................................................................................... 55
   4.5 Problems at Hocking College in the News ......................................................................................... 56
   4.6 Summary of Evidence ....................................................................................................................... 58
5. Why the Ohio Outback Initiative Failed to Take Root.................................................. 59
   5.1 Introduction........................................................................................................ 59
   5.2 Lack of Diffusion .............................................................................................. 59
   5.3 Lack of Consensus ............................................................................................ 61
   5.4 Harnessing Passion for Place ............................................................................ 64

6. Summary and Conclusions.................................................................................... 67
   6.1 Importance of Research.................................................................................... 67
   6.2 Summary of Findings....................................................................................... 68
   6.3 Limitations of the Study ................................................................................... 69
   6.5 Suggestions for Future Research....................................................................... 71

List of References........................................................................................................ 72
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1 Map of Ohio in the United States (Google Maps 2010).................................................. 14
Figure 2.2: Map of the 29 counties of Appalachian Ohio (GOA 2008)........................................ 14
Figure 2.3 Operational Coal Mine in Southeast Ohio (Photo by Patrick Fries, October 2009) .................................................................................................................................................. 21
Figure 2.4 Map of “Hocking Hills” tourism attractions and lodging from HockingHills.com tourism website (Hockinghills.com 2009) ........................................................................................................ 22
Figure 2.5 “About Athens County” from Athens County Convention and Visitors Bureau Website (ACCVB 2010).......................................................................................................................... 23
Figure 2.6 Hocking College Website: “The world at hand” (Hocking College 2009). 27
Figure 2.7 Map of Hocking College Campuses: New Lexington, Logan, Nelsonville (main campus), and Albany (Google Maps 2010). Nelsonville is approximately 62 miles from Ohio’s capital, Columbus .............................................................................................................. 30
Figure 3.1 “World’s Best Kept Secret”: The Ohio Outback’s web presence (Outback 2010) ........................................................................................................................................................................ 41
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Topic

As North America has undergone a shift from an industrial to a post-industrial society, the rural landscapes devastated by industrial activity (i.e. resource extraction) have begun a transition as well (ODNR 2010). In Southeast Ohio, an economically depressed and formerly environmentally degraded region, this transition can be seen in a gradual forest recovery, or “regreening” (Mather 1992). This regreening process and the decline of the extractive industry have led to a diversification of the Appalachian Ohio economy. Local people have taken advantage of the changing landscape, reasserted a claim on their region, and are pursuing alternative means of economic opportunity (McSweeney & McChesney 2004).

Stauber (2001) says that rural America may become “the involuntary home of the poor and the chosen home of the pleasure seekers, producing a rural ghetto and a rural playground” (p. 10). There is anecdotal evidence of this phenomenon in Appalachian Ohio with the expansion of tourism operations in the Hocking Hills and the increase in traffic between the southeast Ohio and the major cities nearby. Former Hocking College president John Light, Dean of the School of Natural
Resources Russell Tippett, and their collaborators also recognized the attraction of city folk to the country, but hoped to ensure that more local people would be able to capitalize on this growth.

Enlisting the help of other staff members at Hocking College, Light and Tippett suggested promoting the region as a unified entity, rather than relying on counties to create and promote economic development opportunities individually, as had been the dominant mode previously. Tippett and his colleagues adopted the term “outback” to define the Appalachian region of Southeast Ohio, a term first used to describe the region by Ohio Magazine in their article “Ohio’s outback in the southeast” (McSweeney & McChesney 2004).

McSweeney and McChesney argue that the development of a landscape as an “outback” relies on the common processes occurring on these landscapes that are conceptualized by the “outback” label: “the role of rural communities in regional economic development, the increasing heterogeneity of rural landscapes, ecological transitions and contested notions of wilderness, and the simultaneity of urban and rural places” (2004; p. 32). This definition is fitting for the Ohio Outback and this community organization’s attempt to organize a grassroots effort to reclaim their region and create a positive future for Appalachian Ohio.

The vision and actions of the leaders of the Ohio Outback project serves as the foundation of investigation for this thesis. The initiative and subsequent formalization of the region as “The Ohio Outback” were outcomes achieved through the collaboration of Hocking College, the Nelsonville City Council, the local Kiwanis
Clubs, and other local business and community leaders, embodying the agency that may be contributing to the changing landscape of Southeast Ohio and could be central to envisioning alternative futures for the region. The following statement represents the formal vision presented by the leaders of “The Ohio Outback Project”:

The Ohio Outback is the Appalachian Region’s Eco/heritage Tourism Destination where local folks are creating sustainable economic development, maintaining sense of place, and improving our quality of life, and effectively practicing ‘wise use’ principles (Skinner & Biddle 2002).

Through an analysis of the Ohio Outback project and its leaders, this thesis offers a rich narrative about rural economic development, connection to place, and the challenges of place-based initiatives. This thesis also addresses themes of local power and elitism in a rural America, a setting often not associated with those ideas. Through a study on the agency of rural people, this research presents a much more complex and conflicted situation than might be expected in the “backwards” countryside of Appalachian Ohio.

The following questions have guided this research: What kind of future does the Ohio Outback group envision for Appalachian Ohio? How has the group attempted to enact and diffuse their vision for regional development beyond the original working group? How does their plan relate to and embody their sense of Southeast Ohio and engage in “placemaking?” How have issues of power and local
elitism in determining the future of the landscape contributed to the successes and failures of the Ohio Outback?

1.2 Object of Research

My central object of analysis is how local agents, compelled by their connection to place, developed and attempted to implement a plan for rural regional development. This work also takes into consideration the role and influence of a rural educational institution in economic development. This thesis takes a somewhat unorthodox look at the regional development plan in question. Rather than composing a basic critique of the plan, I make first an argument for why the initiative should likely have been fruitful, and then offer reasons why, despite this, it seems to have failed to take hold.

In exploring the object of this research, I have drawn on three major bodies of literature: innovation diffusion, political ecology, and place-based studies. I chose to focus on these literatures because they each aid in the investigation of central themes of the Ohio Outback project. Innovation diffusion literature provided insight into how new innovations—like the Outback initiative—are spread throughout a population. This literature provided useful tools for critique of the dissemination of information to the public regarding the Outback plan.

The evolving landscape and economy of southeast Ohio has led to conflict over who makes determinations regarding the future of economic development in the region and how those conclusions are reached. Political ecology literature pertaining to political decisions about the environment is useful in examining the
actions of the Outback group and power relations between the group and others in the region.

Finally, place-based literature provides a better understanding of the connection people have to certain places and how it may compel their actions. In this case the Outback initiative is based on marketing aspects of a region that a certain group of Appalachian Ohio natives believe to be attractive for tourism. Because the Outback group cites “maintaining sense of place” as a central tenet of their plan (OOTF 2002), it is important for this thesis to investigate the importance of place, development of a sense of place, and the meanings people assign to places.

While a rich body of research exists in geographical literature related to political ecology and place, the integration of innovation diffusion literature is a more unique endeavor. With this thesis I attempt to show that these three literatures complement each other to tell a story about local people formulating innovative plans for their native region. These literatures together assist in exploring the different facets of rural regional development.

While this research centers on rural southeast Ohio, the non-success of the Ohio Outback project can offer generalizable lessons for rural development, place-based studies, and political ecology. This thesis offers a story about sense of place and how different lived experiences and meanings associated with place can lead to dissimilar opinions on the future of that place. This facilitates useful discussion of rural power relations and the unique influence of local elites and institutions.
Finally, this thesis contributes to literature on the role of community colleges in rural economic development. Across the country, more and more community colleges have seen their mission expanded to include rural economic development. This charge is usually unfunded and most colleges decide to focus on place-based development (Fluharty & Scaggs 2007). This thesis contributes to the place-based development literature and provides lessons for other community colleges and local groups attempting to conceive of and carry out their own plan for rural economic development.

1.3 Methods

The research conducted for this thesis was completed through a qualitative mixed methods approach including participant observation, interviews, and textual analysis. By approaching my questions through multiple methods of inquiry, I hoped to gain richer insight into both my research questions and Appalachian Ohio and its people.

Initially, I conducted a participant observation study at a Women, Infants and Children (WIC) health center in The Plains, Ohio. As Robin Kearns suggests in his chapter on the method of participant observation, simply “being there” can provide fruitful data on the everyday lives, experiences, and traditions of a population (2000). Participant observation allowed me to interact with residents of Appalachian Ohio in their own environment and in a less structured situation.

The purpose of this phase of my research was to gain insight on the people living and working in the region and their experiences before beginning the
interview phase of research. For this preliminary work, I volunteered at the WIC clinic on behalf of the Nelsonville Public Library once a week for eight weeks spending approximately three-hours each visit. My official volunteer duties included distributing free books to the children visiting the clinic, reading with them and engaging them verbally. At the same time, I made an effort to be intentional in my observations of those who visited the clinic and mentally recorded information I gleaned about their lived experiences in the region. At the end of each observation period, I recorded my findings and personal notes for the day in my research journal.

In selecting a site to engage in this participant observation, I considered the principles laid out by Kearns (2000). Kearns talks of choosing a site in which you are socially marginal, finding a midpoint between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ status. As a young, white female with a Southern accent, I did not stand out in the clinic waiting room. I always dressed modestly and casually and fit well into my role as local library volunteer. In superficial ways I seemed a natural fit at the site, but my anonymity kept me an outsider in the small community in which many clinic visitors were familiar with other patients and the staff. In Kearns discussion on gaining access to social settings, he notes that having a “known role” can be invaluable in not only helping a researcher gain entry, but also legitimizing his or her presence (2000). This was my goal in using my volunteer time as my opportunity for participant observation. In my case it made my presence at the clinic purposeful
and gave me a reason to approach and begin discussions with people in the community.

My second method of inquiry involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews with faculty and staff from Hocking College as well as Russell Tippett, leader of the Outback group, and Trudy Massey, local resident and current Outback committee member. I utilized the “snowball sampling” method (Montello & Sutton 2006) to acquire additional contacts at Hocking College and in the region. All Hocking College employee interviews took place on the main Nelsonville campus of the college except one, which was conducted at Hocking College’s Logan, Ohio campus at the Hocking College Energy Institute and included a tour of the facility. All of the interviews were recorded with the subjects’ permission on a digital voice recorder and transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed in their entirety for their insights on the guiding research questions.

Most of the interviews lasted approximately one hour, save for the interview conducted with Russell Tippett. My talk with Tippett lasted about six hours and included a visit to his home, an in-depth tour of the region, a presentation regarding the Outback project, lunch at a locally-owned restaurant, and an interview with Trudy Massey arranged by Tippett at her business, The Ohio Outback Lodge. Throughout the day Tippett and I spoke informally about the region, Hocking College, and the Outback project.

I felt that interviews were an appropriate form of investigation because they allowed for flexibility to explore interesting issues that a respondent might mention.
in greater detail. Semi-structured interviews allow for in-depth probing of certain ideas, which can help to glean rich data. I originally hoped to code the interviews for particular recurring words or phrases to be used as quantitative data (Berry 2002), but I found each interview to be too unique to cite specific phrases. Although similar themes ran through each of the interviews, the data did not lend itself well to coding.

The interviews conducted for this research were unique in that most, if not all, of the subjects could be considered local elites. Save for one subject who had not continued her education after high school, all of the subjects interviewed for this study were college graduates. Regionally about 20 percent of working-age people have completed college (Black, Pollard, & Sanders 2007). Also, because all of these subjects (again, save for one) are or have been employed by Hocking College in a professional position, they possess a higher socioeconomic status than others in the region and garner some respect because of their affiliation with the institution.

Because of their relatively elite position, the manner in which I conducted the interviews was markedly different than my informal interactions with those I spoke with during the preliminary participant observation study. During the interviews I had to maintain an awareness of the power relationships at play in the interview, particularly with the men in the highest leadership positions at the college. In a few situations, these “local elites” seemed happy to command the interview not only because of their position of power, but because they were experienced in having their voice heard and knew how to convey their perspective effectively (Berry
2002). It seemed they had a message associated with their leadership position they were accustomed to relaying in interviews, and I had to tailor my questions to get past their usual spiel. It was especially important to be reflective after these interviews and remain cognizant that there are multiple sides to each story.

My own position was unique in these interviews as well. Interviewees granted me a certain amount of respect because of my academic status and connection with Ohio State University. Being a female interviewing men in positions of leadership at Hocking College, it seemed my age and gender was somewhat disarming. At times I wondered if they remembered that I was recording our conversation because our conversations about the leadership at Hocking College occasionally became quite candid. My interviews with all subjects also seemed aided by the fact I grew up in a rural, impoverished state and spoke with a southern accent. There was a mutual sense in my interviews that my subjects and I had something in common. Despite this, my non-native status was evident at times during the interviews. The quality of the data generated by the interviews could have been enhanced had I possessed a better knowledge base about the region, but my status as an outsider did allow me to ask and interpret questions without the bias of a local citizen.

The third method I utilized to address my research object was textual analysis. I reviewed materials published by Hocking College that conveyed their mission, vision, goals, and community engagement. Additionally, I analyzed newspaper articles and editorials for content related to the Outback project, its
primary leaders, regional tourism and development, and recent conflict at Hocking College. I also took survey of the Ohio Outback website and local tourism websites to search for evidence of the use of the Outback brand.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured as follows. In the first chapter I have offered a brief introduction to the topic of the paper and its significance. I also lay out the methods of inquiry used to investigate this topic, a rationale for the use of those methods, and a brief discussion of my positionality within the research process. The second chapter consists of an overview of relevant background information on Appalachian Ohio, Hocking College, and the Ohio Outback project. This literature provides a historic context to recent events in the region and a background on the local economy and residents. The information regarding Hocking College demonstrates not only its specific history and role in the region, but also conveys the important role rural community colleges play in their respective regions.

In chapter three I triangulate three literatures, innovation diffusion, political ecology, and sense of place, to offer reasons why it would seem that the Ohio Outback project might have been expected to be a resounding success in Appalachian Ohio. This chapter also presents evidence that the initiative experienced some early attention in the region and recognition by outsiders.

The fourth chapter offers evidence that the Outback idea did not take hold in the region as expected. The evidence offered comes from newspaper articles and editorials, interviews, and visible work in the region linked to the Outback project
(or lack thereof). The fifth chapter then examines the evidence offered and the literatures discussed previously to suggest reasons why the Outback project did not succeed as expected.

The final chapter provides a summary of the findings of this thesis and reiterates the importance of the research. This chapter also includes a discussion of the limitations and difficulties encountered in the study and suggestions for future research.
2.1 Introduction to Appalachian Ohio

Southeast Ohio makes up a portion of the Appalachian region of the United States, a region known for its historic connection to industrial extraction and poverty. The state of Ohio recognizes 29 counties in east central and southeast Ohio as being part of Appalachia (GOA 2008) (Figure 2.1 & 2.2). The label “Appalachia” conjures certain images in the minds of Americans, usually images of hills, coal miners, and poverty. This chapter will demonstrate that although these stereotypical images are not uncharacteristic of Appalachian Ohio, the region is experiencing economic changes and possesses a depth of character developed through its difficult history. This chapter will provide an overview of the history of coal mining in the region, a brief historical background of the people, poverty and progress of Appalachia over the last fifty years, and examples of the diversification of southeast Ohio’s economy. It will then explain the important role Hocking College has had in the region since its opening in 1968 and provide background information on the Ohio Outback economic development initiative.
Figure 2.1 Map of Ohio in the United States (Google Maps 2010).

Figure 2.2: Map of the 29 counties of Appalachian Ohio (GOA 2008).
2.2 Coal Mining in Appalachian Ohio

Southeastern Ohio contains the fourth largest underground coal reserve in Appalachia (Harvey 1986). Although Appalachia accounts for only about one-fourth of the underground reserves and one-eighth of the surface reserves in the United States, the region’s coal is valued for its heating value and purity (Harvey 1986). Records of coal mining in Appalachian Ohio exist as far back as 1800. The growth of the coal industry in the early 1800s led to the development of a canal system to make shipping coal from interior Ohio to distant markets feasible. As the Industrial Revolution took hold in the mid-1800s, the demand for coal and coal products increased both in Ohio and around the country. Additionally, the Civil War caused a spike in domestic coal demand (Crowell 2005). As the American economy and Ohio’s railroad system further expanded in the late 19th century and into the 20th century, so did Ohio’s coal industry. In 1970 miners in Ohio were extracting a record 55 million tons of coal (Crowell 2005).

Most mining in Ohio through the 1940s was conducted underground, but beginning in the mid-twentieth century technological innovations made surface mining more commonplace. New surface mining techniques allowed for cheaper, more efficient extraction using fewer employees. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) cites that “in 1898 there were 1,155 underground mines operating in Ohio, compared to seven in 2003; in 1908, there were 50,267 coal miners employed in Ohio coal mines, compared to 2,279 in 2003” (Crowell 2005, p. 2). Although ODNR uses these figures in their educational literature to demonstrate
the increase in surface mining and the lower number of miners needed with this technique, it is also important to note that Ohio’s annual coal production declined 59 percent between 1970 and 2003 (Crowell 2005). Obviously this contributed to both the decline in the number of underground coalmines and number of miners.

The decline of the mining industry after 1970 can be partially attributed to increased regulations on surface-mine activity, reclamation, and stricter health and safety standards. However, the Ohio Department of Natural Resources claims that the Federal Clean Air Act of 1970 played a primary role in the industry’s decline in Ohio due to its strict regulation of sulfur dioxide emissions (Crowell 2005). Ohio’s coal resources are high in sulfur, while the western U.S. holds reserves of low-sulfur sub-bituminous coal, shifting much of the post-1970 coal production to that region (Harvey 1986).

Not only did the decline of the mining industry in Ohio have an economic impact on southeastern Ohio, the landscape of the region was left with the scars of surface extraction. The “Coal Strip Mine Land Reclamation Act” passed by the 98th General Assembly and amendments passed in 1955 and 1959, forced mining companies to replant the land within a prescribed time period after their license to mine their expired (Dickman 1964). This official and unofficial reclamation of former open-cut mines has led to a regreened landscape and a new palate from which local people may envision new uses for the land.
2.3 People, Poverty and Progress in Appalachian Ohio

Although coal mining and mineral extraction provided jobs for the people of southeastern Ohio, the work was difficult, dangerous, and eventually disappeared. As Ben Marsh writes of the anthracite towns of Pennsylvania, “There is a paradox to these valleys. By the measure of their inhabitants, and even of their former inhabitants, these are fine and distinctive places to live; and yet by conventional economic or demographic measures...this is the least attractive part of Pennsylvania. The land means much, but gives little” (1987, p. 337, emphasis added). Both Marsh and Harner cite a solidarity that was created in mining towns through the hard work and sacrifices of mine life and a unified struggle against the exploitation of mine companies. This solidarity remained when the struggle shifted from the hardships of mining to the reality of becoming an isolated region with few economic opportunities (Marsh 1987, Harner 2001).

In southeast Ohio as in other parts of Appalachia, coal companies built “company towns.” These towns included housing for miners and their families built and owned by the coal company. The creation of company housing helped to create a stable labor force, attracted new workers, increased productivity, and gave the company of ownership greater control over its workers. Not only did this give them the power of eviction over their employees, many company towns had company stores for goods so that miners could be paid in ‘company cash’ rather than U.S. currency (Mulrooney 1991).
With the decline of the mining industry in Appalachian Ohio, citizens were left with small company towns scattered throughout the remote region. Even as the coal companies left the region, the corporations still retained ownership of many of the original company houses. In some instances families were only allowed to stay in these homes until the man employed by the coal company died. The homes were then forcibly vacated and either destroyed or sold by the coal company (R. Tippett, personal communication, October 15, 2009).

The legacy of coal in southeastern Ohio has left the region with an undereducated workforce with men making only 80 percent of the income of men outside the region in 2000 and women earning about 77 percent of the income earned by women in other parts of the country. About 52 percent of women and 70 percent of men were employed full-time in Appalachia in 2000 compared to 55 percent and 72 percent outside the region, respectively (Black et al. 2007).

Although incomes and economic opportunities are still lagging in Appalachia, Black et al. (2007) found that education was the single most important factor in the improvement of socioeconomic status in Appalachia. As educational attainment rates have risen since 1960, so have incomes and employment. In the past fifty years, the Appalachian economy has grown faster than the nation’s economy as a whole. The percentage of men completing high school rose from 35 percent in 1960 to 80 percent in 2000. This rise in the number of educated people in the region has been one of the keys to helping local people create and take advantage of
diversified economic opportunities in their region. The people of southeastern Ohio have come to the understanding that education is their new way forward.

With a more educated workforce than ever before looking for jobs outside of the traditional Appalachian industries, some local people have had to seek employment outside of southeast Ohio. At the same time, few residents from other parts of the country have moved into southeast Ohio (Lichter, Garratt, Marshall, & Cardella 2005). While it is true that Appalachia’s population is on average older than the population of the rest of the United States—an obvious indicator of youth out-migration from the region—not all of the educated working-age people forced to leave the region for work are doing so permanently. Commuting patterns from southeast Ohio show that citizens are traveling longer distances to work in order to keep their residence in southeast Ohio. For example, 16.7 percent of workers living in Hocking County and 16.9 percent in Perry County commute to Franklin County each day (Columbus, OH). In Vinton, Morgan, Perry, and Hocking Counties between 47 and 59.7 percent of workers commute outside of the county for work (ODD 2003). These statistics are characteristic of other counties in southeast Ohio, with Athens being an exception likely due to the presence of large employers like Ohio University and Hocking College located there.

The increase in educational attainment rates and the willingness to commute outside of their region is evidence of the commitment that local people have to southeastern Ohio. In the years since the decline of the coal industry, the people of southeast Ohio have shown their commitment to reclaiming their region from years
of exploitation and create an alternative future. The next section will briefly detail the diversification of southeast Ohio’s economy, an effort by local people to enable themselves and future generations to remain in the region through the creation of new economic opportunities.

2.4 Diversification of the Appalachian Ohio Economy

Data from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) cites that in 1965 one in three Appalachians lived in poverty. Since 1990, the poverty rate has declined to half of what it was in 1965, and the ARC attributes this to efforts by communities to diversify their economies, citing a move from heavy industry, agriculture, and mining to jobs in service industries, retail, and government. While the previously mentioned commuting patterns show that some locals are traveling outside of southeast Ohio for work, others are working to create more jobs at home. Residents in the region are searching for new ways to earn a living, utilize their environment, and secure a positive future for the region.

Recent statistics from the Ohio Department of Development back up the ARC’s claim showing that the highest employment levels are in state and local government, retail, accommodations and food service, and health care and social services. Manufacturing employs about ten percent of workers in Hocking, Perry, and Vinton counties. There are still some opportunities for work in extractive industries in southeast Ohio as a few coalmines around the region are operational (Figure 2.3). About seven percent of people in Perry County work in mining and three percent in Hocking County (Larrick et al 2009). Forestry shows up as a minor
source of employment, including those engaged in private timber management and extraction, but others classified as government employees like those employees of the Wayne National Forest also work in the field (B. Sabo, personal communication, July 27, 2009).

One of the major new private economic sectors in southeast Ohio is tourism. The landscape of southeast Ohio—once devastated by surface mining—has undergone a dramatic regreening process due both to mine reclamation programs and natural regeneration (ODNR 2010). This newly greened landscape offers an ideal setting for eco and adventure tourism activities. Small lodging operations, ATV trails, ziplines, hunting lodges, and hiking trails throughout southeast Ohio are now advertised to locals and residents of larger cities like Columbus and Cincinnati. The natural and built attractions on the Highway 33 corridor between Columbus and Athens are often advertised under the label of “The Hocking Hills” (hockinghills.com
Athens County attempts to attract visitors with its cultural assets, emphasizing arts and history (ACCVB 2010) (Figure 2.5).

Figure 2.4 Map of “Hocking Hills” tourism attractions and lodging from HockingHills.com tourism website (Hockinghills.com 2009).
In addition to small tourism businesses begun independently by local people, Hocking College in Nelsonville, Ohio offers programs in areas like eco and heritage tourism, natural and historical interpretation, wildlife management, and parks and
recreation (Hocking 2009a). Graduates of these programs have gone on to take jobs locally with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, as private forestry consultants, and as employees in the hospitality industry (L. Coon, personal communication, July 9, 2009; R. Tippett, personal communication October 15, 2009). Leaders at Hocking College also started the Ohio Outback initiative to promote tourism, which will be discussed at length throughout this paper.

Hocking College and Ohio University are two of the largest employers in the region. In addition, the alternative energy program operated by the Hocking College Energy Institute is working to attract green technology firms to their industrial park (J. Hutton, personal communication, July 23, 2009). These educational institutions play an important role as employers, sources of pride for the region, and accessible educational opportunities.

It is obvious both statistically and anecdotally that the economy of southeast Ohio has diversified in the past fifty years. Still, unemployment county-by-county hovered between a low of 6.6 percent in Athens County and a high of 9.3 percent in Vinton County in 2008 (Larrick et al. 2009). Personal communication with leaders at Hocking College demonstrated an obvious disconnect in the region between those with education and those without. The Dean of Natural Resources at Hocking College and women with whom I spoke informally at a local health clinic all related that those without a formal education still found their employment options limited to low wage jobs in retail or fast food establishments (L. Coon, personal...
communication, July 9, 2009). Despite the progress that has been made in the region, many still struggle to survive.

2.5 Hocking College—A community institution

Research from the ARC shows that education has been the single most important factor in improving the socioeconomic status of people in Appalachia. For rural regions community colleges play an important and multifaceted role. The specific missions of community colleges vary by institution, but in general they exist to provide accessible, affordable education and life-long learning opportunities to the regions they serve (AACC 2009). In rural service areas, community colleges often take on more responsibility, serving as centers for cultural and community activities and economic development (Pennington, Williams, & Karvonen 2006). Rural community colleges play an ever-expanding and important role in their communities acting as a conduit of both progress and the reaffirmation of traditional rural life-ways and place (Miller & Tuttle 2007; Miller & Kissinger 2007). The goal of progress in the context of these rural communities is often closely intertwined with ideas about place and rural life. Rural community colleges and other entities seeking to improve their region must work toward economic and social progress that recognizes rural culture and lifeways while piloting new ideas for creating a positive future for rural people (Miller & Tuttle 2007).

The Task Force on Rural Community Colleges defines the rural community college as being “publicly supported, located in a population center of under 100,000 people, serving a vast geographic area, and having programmatic thrust
towards comprehensiveness” (Pennington, Williams, & Karvonen 2006, p. 642). For southeast Ohio, Hocking College, located in Nelsonville, Ohio, fulfills this important role. Hocking College was central to the development of the Ohio Outback initiative, and exemplifies some of the insights of research into the multifaceted role of community colleges in rural regions.

Started in 1968 as Tri-County Technical College, Hocking College currently enrolls approximately 6,000 students with over 60 percent of those students coming from southeastern Ohio (Hocking 2009b). Hocking College has been able to serve local students while still remaining relevant on a national and global scale, enrolling students from all 88 Ohio counties, 17 states and about 30 countries (Figure 2.6). The Dean of Enrollment Services cites that the School of Natural Resources attracts over half of its enrollment from beyond Athens, Hocking, and Perry counties (Hocking 2009b). That same natural resources program awards more degrees in natural resource conservation than any other college in the country. Hocking College also graduates more nurses than any other school in Ohio and offers the only two-year industrial ceramics degree in the country (Baldwin 2007).
Hocking College plays a vital role in Appalachian Ohio, serving not only as an educational institution, but also a major source of employment and economic development. The college employs over 500 people and has a budget of almost $40 million dollars, which makes it one of the largest employers in the region (Baldwin 2007). Still, like other rural community colleges around the country, Hocking

Figure 2.6 Hocking College Website: “The world at hand” (Hocking College 2009).
College faces the challenge of funding an ever-expanding mission. Most of the funding rural community colleges receive comes on a per-credit basis from the state. Rural community colleges lack visibility and clout and are often overlooked in discussion when higher education appropriations are determined (Pennington, Williams, & Karvonen 2006). Because of this, students bear more of the burden through tuition costs. Local communities have tried to make up the difference by leveraging new taxes, but in many cases this provides little relief because of the shrinking tax base in rural regions (Fluharty & Scaggs 2007).

This under funding by the state and federal government disregards the fact that the operating costs per-student are higher for small colleges and that the geographic location and extent of rural service areas often leads to higher expenses (Fluharty & Scaggs 2007). Obtaining grants to supplement the funding shortfall is complicated by the fact that most rural community colleges have few if any staff set aside for grant writing (Pennington, Williams, & Karvonen 2006). Larry Coon, Dean of the School of Natural Resources at Hocking College, said that there are many projects their school would like to pursue, but his staff are overextended already, leaving no one to focus on grants (personal communication, July 9, 2009).

Despite the resource disparity between rural and urban/suburban community colleges, the mission of the rural community college has grown to encompass economic development in addition to its primary duty of education recognized by the per-credit funding system. This charge to be a leader in rural economic development is a largely unfunded mission and includes “industry
training, developmental education, community service, and continuing education” (Fluharty & Scaggs 2007). One community college leader in Kansas put it this way, “our college has become the economic engine for our entire service region, no longer do we just get people ready for jobs, we do the whole economic development package” (Pennington, Williams, & Karvonen 2006, p. 649).

Hocking College has attempted to fulfill this mission on a number of different fronts. As this thesis details, Hocking College leaders pioneered the innovative Ohio Outback project to promote place-based development solutions and wrote grants in hopes of funding the project (OOTF 2002). This type of project has been noted in the rural community college literature by Fluharty and Scaggs who point out that because these plans are locally initiated at the colleges, they are often “unrecognized by state funding plans” (2007, p. 24). Additionally, although these types of economic development efforts have seen success, they usually occur in isolation and are only recognized anecdotally. Still, this success is complicated by the fact that because community college funding is sporadic, ongoing community projects and annual events run the risk of losing their funding with little warning (Fluharty & Scaggs 2007).
Figure 2.7 Map of Hocking College Campuses: New Lexington, Logan, Nelsonville (main campus), and Albany (Google Maps 2010). Nelsonville is approximately 62 miles from Ohio’s capital, Columbus.

Beyond the Outback project and the successful academic programs mentioned previously, the Hocking College Energy Institute opened in 2009 on the Logan, Ohio campus (Figure 2.7). Funded largely by a $1.6 million grant from the U.S. Economic Development Administration, the Energy Institute provides
technology training in areas like fuel cell technology for automobiles and solar technology. Additionally, the institute partners with green technology businesses to provide short-term training programs and collaborates with other companies within the adjacent Logan-Hocking Industrial Park as well as around the country (HCEI 2009 & personal communication, Jerrold Hutton, July 23, 2009).

2.6 “The Ohio Outback” Initiative

According to a brief history of the Ohio Outback initiative written by Cindy Baden, Outback group member and former assistant to past-president of Hocking College, John Light, the idea of forming a community revitalization group based at Hocking College began in the late 1980s (Baden 2000). One of the early initiatives preceding the Ohio Outback project was a non-profit group, Towne Centre, Inc. The goal of Towne Centre, Inc. was to preserve historic buildings in Nelsonville’s square and attract new businesses to keep the center viable (Baden 2000).

Dr. John Light served as one of the original leaders of Towne Centre, Inc. By 1994 Dr. Light and his colleagues at Hocking College began developing a comprehensive strategy for economic and community development to expand on the work of groups like Towne Centre, Inc. and to unite Appalachian Ohio. Baden notes that while the idea remained dormant and mere conversation at Hocking College through the late 1990s, by 2001 the group began an assertive campaign to brand the region as “The Ohio Outback” (2000).

There is some discrepancy about the timeline, as the history written for the group by Baden is dated June 2000, yet she mentioned the rise of the initiative in
2001. Regardless, mention of the Ohio Outback increased significantly in Athens county newspapers after the Outback group’s assertive campaign launch (Claussen 2002). It is unclear how the label itself emerged over the nearly two decades of discussion at Hocking College and in the Nelsonville community. One of the first associations of the term ‘outback’ with Appalachian Ohio appeared in an article in Ohio Magazine in 1989 (Ware). McSweeney and McChesney trace the name from Ohio Magazine to the ‘Outback Inn Bed & Breakfast’ in McConnelsville, Ohio (2004). According to Russell Tippett, the primary champion of the Ohio Outback initiative, three local residents, including John Light, claim to have coined the term for use in Appalachian Ohio (R. Tippett, personal communication, October 15, 2009).

Despite some confusion concerning the origin of the label, Tippett, Light, and their Hocking College Task Force embraced “The Ohio Outback” as their choice for branding the region. By October of 2002 the Ohio Outback group had made 29 formal presentations throughout the 29 counties of Appalachian Ohio, obtained signed resolutions in support of the creation of the Ohio Outback from ten local entities, and obtained signed resolutions in support of the creation of ‘Regional Mine Museums’ from eight local groups, including the United Mine Workers of America (OOTF 2002).

The support of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) was significant not only because it was an additional stakeholder to bolster the Outback project, but also because of the rich history of the union in southeast Ohio. Founded as a company town for the New Straitsville Coal Company, New Straitsville, Ohio is often
called the unofficial birthplace of the UMWA. Frustrated by low wages and poor working conditions, New Straitsville miners began organizing secret meetings in Robinson’s Cave. These meetings culminated in the Great Hocking Valley Coal Strike of 1884, which ended with coal workers filling coal carts with wood, setting them aflame, and rolling them into the mine. The fire started in 1884 still burns under New Straitsville today (OHS 2005). The union in New Straitsville met with other early unions in Columbus, Ohio in 1890 to formally create the UMWA (UMWA 2010). The UMWA’s support of the creation of mining museums in the region pays homage to the change agents who have occupied the hills of southeast Ohio for generations, and secured a prominent organization to boost the Ohio Outback initiative.

Still, in Tippett’s own progress report to the Outback Task Force he notes that interest began waning in 2002, a mere year after the campaign’s major launch and media blitz (OOTF 2002). The campaign never regained momentum after 2002, with declining interest in the campaign being evidenced in two significant ways. First, fewer mentions of the Ohio Outback could be found in local newspapers and published brochures after 2002. Second, the Outback group failed to meet the goals they set forth in their master plan, written as part of their progress report in 2002. The elements of the plan were to be carried out between 2002 and 2004. Some of the goals included “systematically educating and training community leaders and workers,” attracting five new nature-based stores on Nelsonville’s Public Square, establishing two eco/heritage tourism businesses, supporting community artisans,
and creating a new museum based on the extractive history of Appalachian Ohio (OOTF 2002). The non-success of these initiatives is evident on the landscape of Southeast Ohio as the businesses and museums did not materialize. My interview with Tippett revealed the difficulties of carrying out these plans, and his records show that the group was unsuccessful in acquiring the necessary grant funding to support their initiatives.

Despite the lack of visible success thus far, Tippett and an ad-hoc committee comprised of some of the original task force members and some new community members have worked in different capacities over the past ten years to further the Outback idea. In 2008 Tippet registered “The Ohio Outback” name with the State of Ohio. He said he did so in order to protect the name from being used for businesses that “do not further the mission” of the project. He also sought to prevent anyone else from obtaining a trademark for the name and profiting from it (R. Tippett, personal communication, October 15, 2009). He and the ad-hoc group allow anyone to use the name for their business, although Tippett ultimately retains control.

Although work has continued on the Ohio Outback project and there is some evidence of diffusion of the idea, overall the initiative has failed to gain public support and consensus on the ‘Ohio Outback’ brand and accompanying marketing and development strategies. This thesis will explore reasons for the mediocre impact of the initiative in the chapters to follow.
Chapter 3

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Conceptual Approach

By all accounts the efforts of the Ohio Outback group seem as though they would be a resounding success. Outsiders like McSweeney and McChesney (2004) cited the initiative as a successful example of a discursively re-imagined landscape. They describe the project as being “shepherded from the grass-roots, only later entrained by government” (McSweeney & McChesney 2004). McSweeney and McChesney relate the processes at work in Appalachian Ohio to global processes of ‘outbacking’ around the world. Additionally, the Outback initiative would appear to illustrate key principles of three inter-connected literatures. Literature on diffusion of innovation, political ecology, and sense of place all offer reasons why the Ohio Outback initiative might have gained a foothold in Appalachian Ohio and resulted in positive change and an alternative future for the region. In this chapter I will discuss the ways in which the literatures support the notion that a grassroots rural economic development plan such as this one should have likely led to positive change in the community and on the landscape of southeastern Ohio.
3.2 Diffusion of Innovations—Ideas on the Move

“Diffusion of innovations is a process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among members of a social system” (Rogers 2003, p. 5). While the Ohio Outback initiative may not seem like an innovation in the typical sense of the word, an innovation is defined as any “idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption” (Rogers 2003, p. 11). These ‘new’ ideas, like the Ohio Outback initiative, often bring about social change in intentional and unintentional ways as they are adopted (Harper & Leicht 2007).

Rural sociologist Everett Rogers explains that innovations can be evaluated on five main characteristics to determine how quickly and widely they will be adopted. These characteristics include relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability (Rogers 2003). The Ohio Outback can be evaluated against each of these factors. Light, Tippett, and the Outback team believed the Ohio Outback plan for economic development to be superior to previous plans for growth in Appalachian Ohio. In launching the initiative, they felt that their plan possessed a definite advantage relative to other ideas because it marketed the region as a unified entity rather than relying on individual counties to market the region’s amenities (R. Tippett, personal communication, October 15, 2009).

The Ohio Outback plan was also developed to be compatible with the “existing values, past experiences, and needs of potential adopters” as required by
Rogers (2005, p. 15). With an explicit focus on “maintaining our sense of place,” the Outback group sought to develop the region by reviving the “public square,” establishing eco and heritage tourism operations, showcasing community artisans, and creating “authentic” museums based on the region’s industrial and extractive history (OOTF 2002). The Ohio Outback initiative not only seemed compatible with the values of the Appalachian Ohio region, but the idea was also meant to simplify the marketing of the area. By providing a streamlined plan for economic development, the Outback group hoped to avoid the “complexity” of fragmented strategies and offer a simple solution by tailoring the plan to the regions’ strengths and citizens’ connection to place (Rogers 2005, OOTF 2002).

Although trialability with a comprehensive development plan like the Ohio Outback seems as though it would be difficult, because of the group’s connection to Hocking College, there were opportunities for experimentation with elements of the plan. As Dean of the School of Natural Resources, Tippett tasked the eco and heritage tourism faculty with encouraging students to develop mock businesses for the region (OOTF 2002). Natural & historical interpretation students developed and piloted tour programs in Appalachian Ohio (K. Bowald, personal communication, July 27, 2009). Additionally, the loosely related group, Town Centre, Inc., provided free rent to select artisans on a trial basis to launch art studios in the public square (OOTF 2002). These programs allowed the Outback group the opportunity to brainstorm on what features of the region to promote and test the interest in various historical and natural tours.
The final characteristic, observability, also seemed unproblematic in southeast Ohio. A number of the changes in Nelsonville’s public square were clearly visible to community members. For example, the “Ohio Outback Travel & Ecotourism Center,” operated by Hocking College, was opened to provide information for local visitors (McSweeney & McChesney 2004). During this time other businesses were opened by community supporters, which helped to fill empty storefronts on the public square. The Outback group hoped these operations would help to draw visitors to the area. Some of these businesses included Mossey Oak (now closed), Star Brick Deli (now closed), Attitudes, Ltd., the Mine Tavern, and the Foothills School of American Crafts studio and store (OOTF 2002). Tippett and members of the task force also made formal presentations of their plan and progress to local social, civic, service, and governmental organizations in all 29 counties of Appalachian Ohio (OOTF 2002). Local resident and Outback advocate Trudy Massey opened The Ohio Outback Lodge in McConnelsville, Ohio, which also helped to test the potential for success of the project (T. Massey, personal communication, October 15, 2009). The fulfillment of these characteristics should have contributed to a speedier adoption rate.

Rogers refers to an “innovation-decision process...through which an individual (or other decision making unit) passes from first knowledge of an innovation to forming an attitude toward the innovation, to a decision to adopt or reject, to implementation and use of the new idea, and to confirmation of this decision” (2005, p. 20). The Ohio Outback initiative was adopted (or rejected) as an
innovation in different ways by individuals and entities because of the scale and nature of the innovation. For most citizens of Appalachian Ohio, adoption required merely the acceptance and use of the term ‘Ohio Outback’ in their common regional vernacular. For other individuals and community leaders, adoption meant actively marketing the initiative, starting small businesses, and altering local economic development strategies. Fundamentally, for all parties involved, moving toward an affirmative decision on the innovation required consensus on the attribution of a particular label and associated meanings to the region, or what Rogers terms “collective innovation decisions” (2005, p. 28).

Rogers also discusses the importance of channels of communication in moving through the stages of decision. There are two primary channels: mass media channels and interpersonal communication (Rogers 2005). Before the formal Outback plan was conceived, a radio show called Live from Ohio’s Outback was broadcast by the owners of “Outback Inn Bed & Breakfast” in McConnelsville. With about 400 episodes broadcast beginning in 1992, this radio program may have been one of the initial methods of diffusion of the ‘outback’ label to the public (McSweeney & McChesney 2004).

After the formalization of the Outback campaign, the Ohio Outback group attempted to diffuse their brand through both mass media and interpersonal communication (Figure 3.1). Tippet writes in the Outback Initiative Progress Report that “during October 2001, The Ohio Outback concept and initiative was assertively introduced to the general public via television, radio, newspapers and
pubic presentations to civic, service, and social organizations, to local governments, and to ministerial associations” (OOTF 2002, p. 8). Tippet conveyed personally that he also works to diffuse the Ohio Outback idea one individual at a time (R. Tippet, personal communication, October 15, 2009). Roger’s research contends that most potential adopters make an evaluation of the innovation based on subjective information from those that have adopted the innovation, showing Tippet’s interpersonal efforts to be potentially useful for diffusion (Rogers 2005).
3.3 Political Ecology—Conflict Over Landscape

Hempel defines political ecology as “the study of interdependence among political units and of interrelationships between political units and their
environment...concerned with the political consequences of environmental change” (2000, p. 150). Robbins (2004) tells us that research in political ecology interrogates the sometimes-covert political processes that underlie environmental change. In the case of the Ohio Outback, their plans for change on the landscape and utilization of resources are related to what Robbins describes as “the environmental identity and social movement thesis” (2004, p. 15). This perspective on political ecology investigates what happens on a landscape when the management of the environment changes hands, in this case from extractive industries to other players, and local people see a new opportunity for political action. In engaging in this action, disparate groups from within a community may unite over the cause of exercising sovereignty over their environment (Robbins 2004).

The Ohio Outback initiative consisted of collaboration between community leaders and employees of Hocking College. While this pairing may seem natural, the group also sought to include students and community members who may not be politically engaged and capitalize on their connection to the region. By including diverse stakeholders and engaging a larger portion of the community, the Outback group hoped to gain momentum as a social and economic movement. Alan Scott defines this kind of organization as, “a collective actor constituted by individuals who understand themselves to have common interests and, for at least some significant part of their social existence, a common identity” (Scott 1990, p.6, in Robbins 2004, p. 190). In this case, this common identity is a connection to a place, Appalachian Ohio, as will be discussed in the next section.
Russell Tippett acknowledged the need to achieve this common recognition of the region as the Ohio Outback, as the initiative hinges on individual participation and promotion of the initiative. According to Tippett, an integral part of successfully marketing the rural region depended on “word of mouth” referrals between businesses throughout Appalachian Ohio (R. Tippett, personal communication, October 15, 2009). Not only does this require collaboration across the region, but it fundamentally necessitates a consensus on the Ohio Outback as the regional brand.

3.4 Deep Roots: Sense of Place as a Powerful Motivator

An introductory cultural geography text defines “place” as, “a term used to connote the subjective, idiographic, humanistic, culturally oriented type of geography that seeks to understand the unique character of individual regions and place, rejecting the principles of science as flawed and unknowingly biased” (Jordan-Bychkov, et al. 2006, p. 441). This definition provides a short summary for a complicated term, which has been studied in a vast body of literature. In their resolution of support for the Ohio Outback, the Outback group sets forth “maintaining sense of place” as one of the central principles of their economic development plan (OOTF 2002). By drawing on their own strong connections to place and attempting to capitalize on the natural amenities and history of their place, the Ohio Outback group’s plan seems well positioned for success according to the “sense of place” literature.

In his book Place and Placelessness, Edward Relph (1976) explores the idea of place and sense of place at length. One section of the book of particular significance
for this research is the section on "rootedness and care for place" (p. 37-39). Here, Relph makes the assertion that, “to be attached to places and have profound ties with them is an important human need” (p. 38). He provides reasoning for why people have the desire to maintain their sense place in that attachment to place grants a person security and a place from which to view and understand the rest of the world. He explains that care for a place goes deeper than simply appreciating your past there—“there is also a real responsibility and respect for that place both for itself and for what it is to yourself and to others” (p. 38).

Relph delineates between an “unselfconscious” sense of place, which is by nature authentic, and a “self-conscious” sense of place, but shows how self-conscious places may become authentic. He states, “an authentic sense of place is above all that of being inside and belonging to your place both as an individual and as a member of a community, and to know this without reflecting upon it” (p. 65). Those places created “self-consciously,” may gain meaning and authenticity through being lived in. Relph’s idea of a place becoming authentic aligns well with Ben Marsh’s article on Pennsylvania anthracite towns discussed later (Marsh 1987). The anthracite towns were places that lacked meaning for the people who moved there to work, but eventually became towns to which people held a strong connection to place after years of lived experience in those places.

The members of the initial ad-hoc committee of the Ohio Outback group possessed an unselfconscious sense of place instilled in them by lives lived almost entirely in Appalachian Ohio. Tippett provides anecdotal evidence of this
phenomenon through the placement of his homestead. Tippett conveyed that he recognized the unique qualities and his own profound connection to southeastern Ohio as a young boy, choosing at twelve years of age the hilltop where he eventually built his home (personal communication, October 15, 2009). Tippett and the ad-hoc committee demonstrate the respect and responsibility to place that Relph refers to through their program and its attempt draw on the natural and historical aspects of the place and to mobilize the human capital in the region around a singular plan for regional improvement.

Humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan considers the role of emotion and thought in the creation of connection to place. He is well known for coining the term “topophilia,” which means, “love of place” (Tuan 1974). He describes the role of the humanistic geographer in understanding sense of place as researching “how mere space becomes an intensely human place” (Tuan 1976, p. 269). This study includes “such distinctively humanistic interests as the nature of experience, the quality of the emotional bond to physical objects, and the role of concepts and symbols in the creation of place identity” (Tuan 1976, p. 269).

Allen Pred criticizes the work of humanistic geographers like Tuan, saying that they see place as an “inert, experienced scene” (Pred 1984, p. 279). In contrast, Pred argues that place is ever-becoming through the combination of structuration and time-geography. In other words, place is created “under historically specific circumstances where some institutional projects, and not others, are dominant” (Pred 1984, p. 292).
Drawing on Pred’s attention to historical significance, Ben Marsh’s (1987) article on anthracite towns of Pennsylvania provides an explanation of how a strong sense of place was developed in these mining towns and remains despite the decline of the region’s extractive industries around which the towns were built. The environmentally devastated region studied in Marsh’s article holds many similarities with the recovering landscapes of Southeast Ohio. To explain the idea of place, Marsh uses Shotter’s (1983) definition: “Place is partly the means an area provides for its own continuation but also the meaning derived from its past for its continuation.” Marsh, citing Pred as an influence, argues that sense of place develops through local history, as a combination of the psychological and social functions of the place and the physical landscape.

Through historical analysis, observation of the present landscape, and interaction with local people, Marsh lays out the pattern in which the development of sense of place occurred using Shotter’s terminology. As European immigrants moved to the Pennsylvania countryside to become miners, the place for them held little meaning, but served as their means of survival and the motivation for moving to the place. As the mining industry grew, the towns became more developed and social connections were forged, allowing the communities to strike equilibrium between means and meaning. Meaning was constructed especially through the trust miners developed with their co-workers due to the danger of the mines and through involvement in union organizations. As the mining industry declined and the local economy suffered, the Pennsylvania anthracite towns lost their means of survival,
but were left with great meaning, and an unwavering connection to place (Marsh 1987). This strong sense of place keeps people in these dying towns and causes them to sacrifice the means greatly to hold on to the meaning.

Marsh mentions that this connection to place also causes the residents of this place to look positively toward the future. He notes that many believe the region can be reborn as a tourist destination for urbanites looking for a rural getaway, although he discounts their hopes for a brighter future as a farfetched and naïve idea, later detailing how the ultimate downfall of these communities will occur.

Marsh’s article is useful as a way of theorizing how connection to a post-industrial place like southeast Ohio may develop, but his dreary outlook for the future of these places contradicts the possibility of an alternative future, the goal of the Ohio Outback and other economic development projects in the region.

Secondarily to their main resolution in support of using the moniker “The Ohio Outback” to represent southeast Ohio, other resolutions were signed which mandated that attractions promoted in the region be authentic. For example, local collaborators, including the United Mine Workers of American union, signed resolutions indicating their support for creating historically accurate museums on mining in the region (OOTF 2002).

This work is in contradiction to Park & Coppack’s Elora case study, which found that artifacts of past extraction in that rural landscape had been transformed into idyllic country scenes. Park & Coppack state that, “society seeks to regain the simplicity of rural life while avoiding the backwardness and toughness associated
with this way of life” (2004, p. 164). By maintaining control of their tourism development, the Outback group sought to expose not only the beauty of the landscape, but also their region’s difficult history of extractive industries that demonstrates how tough its people are and how much they have overcome.

These sense of place literatures help to illustrate the strong connection to place that may be developed by residents living in a region for many generations or who have endured uniting hardships on a particular landscape. It is this sense of connection to the landscape that influenced the plan of the Ohio Outback group. It would stand to reason that a plan for economic development created by a group of native Appalachian Ohioans working out of a prominent local institution and striving to maintain a strong sense of place would garner support from the local community.

3.5 Summary of Literatures

While these three literatures are not often cited together, in this case they work in tandem to explain the foundation and goals of the Ohio Outback project. Compelled by their sense of place, local agents persevered to stake a claim on their environment and its conceptualization and diffuse their plan to other stakeholders in the community. These literatures seem to explain that rural development precipitated from within the region by native citizens who possess a love for their place is exactly what would be successful in southeast Ohio.

When I began conducting this research, I expected to find local people who were enthusiastically supportive of this local initiative. Information from these
literatures suggested that the Outback plan was well formulated and executed and McSweeney and McChesney (2004) offered evidence that the initiative was taking hold in the region. Interestingly, Tippett’s documents cite that the extensive interview with McChesney on October 16, 2002 (almost eight years to the day before I interviewed Tippett) signaled to the team that “significant progress” was being made with the initiative because of the interest of outsiders (OOTF 2002).

Additionally, preliminary trips to the region affirmed that nature-based tourism was a major part of the local economy.

However, as my own investigation began, I found that in the years since McSweeney and McChesney’s (2004) article was published, interest in the Ohio Outback project had fallen. I was surprised to find that few people on the Hocking College campus were familiar with the Outback initiative, and those that were, knew little about the plan and were not active in furthering the mission. I expected to see tourism information emblazoned with the moniker, but instead found the dominant brandings to be the “Hocking Hills” label or the Athens County Convention and Visitors Bureau. The rich evidence of success of the Outback program that I envisioned seeing across the region was not present, and instead I found a recent history of controversy and regional marketing strategies that made little if any mention of Appalachian Ohio as “The Ohio Outback.”
Chapter 4

ROTTEN FRUIT: UNDERSTANDING THE NON-SUCCESS OF THE OHIO OUTBACK

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter explained why the Ohio Outback could have been predicted to succeed based on three different bodies of literature. However, evidence from southeast Ohio demonstrates that the Ohio Outback group’s plan temporarily garnered community interest, but was also met with criticism from community members and leaders. Despite the deep roots and genuine love of place the members of the Outback group had for the region, this research shows that their work was hardly fruitful, not to mention the suspicion that they were rotten with corruption. Evidence of community dissent is shown through newspaper editorials, interviews, and the marked lack of progress visible in the community linked to the project. This chapter will detail resources gathered to demonstrate the lack of impact from the Ohio Outback project and the conflict that has ensued over the Outback group’s plans and rhetoric.

4.2 Community Dissent in Public Forums

The Ohio Outback was originally formulated within a small working group of community members employed by Hocking College. After an aggressive public relations campaign in 2001, the public-at-large developed a better idea of the plans
being hatched at the local community college. In January of 2002 an article about the Ohio Outback appeared in *The Athens News* (Claussen 2002). It detailed the group’s plans and featured an interview with Russ Tippett, who, at the time, was serving as the Dean of the School of Natural Resources. Tippett made the following statements in the article that shed light on the Outback group’s intentions for the project and areas in which the public came to critique the program. In regards to what the group hoped the rebranding of the region would accomplish, Tippett said,

...the group wants to help give the region a new identity, apart from the poor Appalachian image that many people have. Millions of people live close to the area; they just have to be given some new reasons to shop and vacation here.

Claussen writes about how Tippett explained the Outback region:

*It’s difficult to describe the Ohio Outback because Tippett doesn’t really know exactly what areas it would include. He and other members of the group just know that with the natural beauty of the area, the bike path, the artists, the craftspeople, and the business leaders, there’s a lot here to attract people.*

Finally, Tippett discussed a major hurdle to the success of the Outback project:

*What they need for the museum, and what they need for all of the project to happen, is money. Money is needed to get the space for a museum and a staff. Money is needed to market the existing businesses in the region as the Ohio Outback. Money is needed to help create new businesses that would bring more customers and tourists to southern Ohio” (Claussen 2002).*

In response to the Ohio Outback article, local citizens Bo Blower and Max Jacobs submitted letters of dissension to *The Athens News* that took issue not only with the Outback moniker, but also the leadership of Hocking College. Blower’s letter expresses his distaste for the label through an anecdote about outhouses:
When I was growing up...in Athens/Appalachia one of the many kids would come up missing, somebody would eventually ask where they were, and the answer usually came back ‘They’re out back’—meaning of course in the outhouse. So I was less than flattered to read that Mr. Russ Tippett now plans to rename my old neighborhood ‘The Ohio Outback’! (Blower 2002).

Blower writes that he believes that this idea perpetuates Appalachian stereotypes saying, “Why not market the place, the idea, and the people with a more positive image than Ohio Outback? What hillbilly thought up that moniker?” (2002).

A week after Blower’s letter to the editor, Jacobs submitted his letter, which took a shot at Tippett directly, calling the Ohio Outback a “proposal being shoved down our throats by a local educator” (Jacobs 2002). Jacobs’ letter calls for “public discussion and deliberation” to come to a new branding that the majority of the community agrees represents the region well. He suggests that assigning a label to the region has stronger ramifications than Tippett and the Outback group realize.

Jacobs argues that an “Outback” region may deter some businesses from locating in the region:

Businesses seek places that are moving forward, on the ball, full of energy and innovation, not places that portray themselves as isolated and backward. Appalachia already has an image problem; why exacerbate it? (2002).

4.3 Lack of Progress at Hocking College

I conducted interviews with a number of administrators at Hocking College between July and October of 2009. The intention of the interviews was to learn about the personal connection local people have to the region and compile evidence regarding the presence of work on the Ohio Outback project on campus. After speaking with faculty and administration in the School of Natural Resources, staff in
charge of campus volunteer programs, and the leader of the Hocking College Energy Institute, I found little proof that the Outback program was still (or ever) a major campus initiative.

Suzanne Brooks-Korner, director of the Community Outreach Center at Hocking College, explained that most of the volunteer positions that she arranges for students are in immediate need areas like food pantries and school tutoring, rather than abstract development like the Ohio Outback. About four years ago the Board of Trustees passed a resolution requiring all students to complete two service-learning courses in order to graduate. Tippett discussed service-learning, internships, and class projects as being ideal opportunities to get students and faculty involved in implementing the Ohio Outback group's ideas. Brooks-Korner said that the requirement was never strictly enforced. Many of the programs that did enforce the requirement in some form told students to find a way to get their hours finished rather than encouraging them to take advantage of the opportunity to volunteer in their field. This move was partially apathy on the part of the faculty, but also because the students needed convenient solutions to the requirement. Many students at Hocking College do not have easy access to transportation, hold jobs outside of school, or have families to support, making it difficult for them to take on extra projects (S. Brooks-Korner, personal communication, July 9, 2009).

Tippett was disappointed in the failure of course projects to contribute to improving the region and the Outback initiative, despite his efforts to make Natural Resources faculty require students to complete locally-focused projects. When
Tippett sat in on ecotourism capstone project presentations, the students’ projects were focused on topics like whale watching in Canada and ziplining in Costa Rica. He told students they should seek out volunteer or internship positions at local bed and breakfasts or Hocking Hills ecotourism outfitters; he never saw evidence that they took his suggestion. Both Tippett and the current Dean of the School of Natural Resources, Larry Coon, have little idea of where their ecotourism graduates are today (R. Tippet, personal communication, October 15, 2009; L. Coon, personal communication, July 9, 2009).

Cultivating an educated and experienced pool of young entrepreneurs and potential employees through Hocking College was one of the goals listed in the Ohio Outback project progress report’s plans for the future (OOTF 2002). The college is still graduating students in fields relevant to the Ohio Outback, but Tippett himself admitted that there were few, if any, faculty still working to further the project. Tippett continually espoused the importance of having people to champion the project at Hocking College, but in the time since the program was developed Tippett and Light have both retired from the college (R. Tippet, personal communication, October 15, 2009). Additionally, current administrators like Larry Coon lament the lack of grant writing staff and funding available at the college, which would be needed to continue interest and support for programs like the Ohio Outback (personal communication, July 9, 2009).
4.4 Ohio Outback Ventures Beyond the College

An interview with Trudy Massey, owner and operator of the The Ohio Outback Lodge in McConnellsville, Ohio offered insight into local political conflict in the region. Massey grew up in southeast Ohio, has a high school education, and longs to see the region she loves emerge from its chronic economic despair. After divorcing her husband, Massey was left with overwhelming bills and a mortgage she could not afford to pay. With the help of Tippett and her business partner Mark Eckert, Massey transformed her home into The Ohio Outback Lodge (T. Massey, personal communication, October 15, 2009).

Beyond operating the lodge, Massey works with Tippett to promote the Ohio Outback program. Tippett believes that the way to get local people to support the initiative is to recruit and train them one by one, as he did with Massey (R. Tippett, personal communication, October 15, 2009). As a resident and business operator in Morgan County, Ohio, Massey has worked to enact change within her county government by serving on the board of the township and as a member of the Morgan County Convention and Visitors Bureau. She contends that the biggest challenge to economic development and promoting the Outback idea is that leaders are not willing to work together (T. Massey, personal communication, October 15, 2009).

Massey also discussed feelings of powerlessness, the difficulties of grassroots organization, and the frustration of the involvement of “politics in everything.” In Massey’s opinion there has been a shift of power in the region from coal companies
and coal town control to an “old boy” system of control. In her opinion, the “old boy” system includes those current local government and convention and visitors bureau leaders, not the men who conceived the Outback project. One of the major hurdles to implementing the Outback initiative is that the Outback group cannot seem to pry power away from these local leaders. Massey related that there are people in the community that want to get involved in the development of the Outback and creating new opportunities in southeast Ohio, but raised the question, “How do you harness the power of the people who want to be involved?” (T. Massey, personal communication, October 15, 2009).

4.5 Problems at Hocking College in the news

Controversy has recently emerged regarding spending and decisions made during the Light administration’s long tenure at the college. Soon after Light made his decision in 2008 to retire from Hocking College when his contract expired in June 2009, the state auditor’s office launched a probe into suspicious spending at the college. The probe looked into funds dispersed from his discretionary fund, the President’s Development Fund, and grant funding paid to three Hocking College administrators, including Light’s wife, Roxanne DuVivier (Ludlow 2009). The auditor’s office also looked into the financial records of The Hocking Hills Travel Agency, run by the College, and the travel reimbursements of Russell Tippett.

At the completion of the investigation by the Ohio State Auditor, Light, DeVivier, Lynette Hull, and Myriah Short were ordered to repay a total of $28,274 to the college. The funds Light was forced to repay were for private travel to his
second home in Shelter Island, New York. DeVivier, Hull, and Short were to repay funds they illegally received from a grant for work that was included in their regular job description. The audit found that the credit card associated with Light’s discretionary fund was often left unpaid or overdue, at one point left with a balance of $16,000. This led to unnecessary interest charges and late fees. The probe by the auditor’s office not only discovered negligence and wrongdoing on the part of the Light administration, it left a dark mark on Light’s long tenure at the college. The involvement of the Ohio Ethics Commission and a criminal investigation by representatives from the Federal Bureau of Investigation cast even more negative light on the administration and its projects (Taylor 2009).

Tippett mentioned in his interview that Light supported his faculty when they pitched new ideas. He encouraged them to take action on their plans through both his words and deeds (personal communication, R. Tippett, October 15, 2009). Much of the funding for these projects (like the Ohio Outback project) came from the president’s discretionary fund. The state audit reviewed the expenditures of the fund against the submitted documentation, but “did not evaluate the appropriateness of decisions made by College management where such decision were at management’s discretion” (Taylor 2009). Still, Light and his administration have been embroiled in controversy over the misspent funds and conflicts between members of Light’s administration and Hocking College’s new president, Ron Erickson (Phillips 2010).
4.6 Summary of Evidence

The interviews conducted with subjects in Appalachian Ohio, the newspaper article and editorials, and recent controversy provide evidence that the Ohio Outback initiative had fundamental problems that inhibited the ability of the program to succeed. First, a lack of regional consensus on the ‘outback’ label kept the program from being adopted and utilized by local people. Second, the project was not able to establish and maintain support at Hocking College. The plans of the Outback group included engaging faculty in the program and training students for careers in the region. Evidence from interviews with staff members showed that this portion of the program was unproductive. This also contributed to a lack of interest outside of the college. Interviews showed that Outback group members, like Massey, who were working to diffuse the program outside of the college faced hurdles as well. Finally, controversy over misspending by the Light administration undermined the work of the Outback project. The investigation by the state auditor’s office exposed larger problems within the administration, which may explain why the Outback program had difficulty garnering followers and continues to founder. The following chapter will examine the evidence presented here and expand on the why the Ohio Outback project faced such difficulty.
Chapter 5

WHY THE OHIO OUTBACK INITIATIVE FAILED TO TAKE ROOT

5.1 Introduction

Chapter four of this thesis provided evidence that the Ohio Outback group’s project has not taken root in Appalachian Ohio as the group had planned. In this chapter, I will explore reasons that may have contributed to the failure of the Ohio Outback initiative. This discussion will draw mainly on the literatures discussed in the third chapter of the thesis, which can be used to help explain what some of the barriers to adoption of the Ohio Outback project may have been.

5.2 Lack of Diffusion

In Roger’s innovation diffusion literature, he discusses the importance of convincing “opinion leaders” in a community to support and utilize an innovation in order to spread it to a wider audience. Opinion leaders are individuals that are “able to influence other individuals’ attitudes or overt behavior informally in a desired way with relative frequency” (Rogers 2003, p. 27). The Ohio Outback project lacked an influential opinion leader. Although the people at the helm of the Outback project fulfilled some of the characteristics of opinion leaders, because they developed the innovation and were the first ones to adopt it, they did not achieve the influence afforded to an opinion leader.
The reaction from those I interviewed and spoke informally with at Hocking College seemed to situate the champion of the project, Tippett, as what Rogers describes at the “most innovative member of a system.” This person is “very often perceived as a deviant from the social system, and is accorded a somewhat dubious status of low credibility by the average members of the system,” making him a poor opinion leader (Rogers 2003, p. 26). As a fervent proponent of the Ohio Outback plan, the reaction from the community toward Tippett and the original task force seemed to be much like Max Jacobs comments in *The Athens News*, which talk of the “proposal being shoved down our throats by a local educator” (Jacobs 2002).

A critical key to the success of the innovation might have been fulfilling the goal the Outback group set forth in their 2002 master plan to “systematically educate and train community leaders and workers” (OOTF 2002). The Ohio Outback group failed to persuade key community leaders to subscribe to the Outback idea. Although the program was created in association with a community institution, Hocking College, they did not win the support of other key institutions. As McSweeney and McChesney cite, the leadership at the Wayne National Forest headquarters had never heard of the initiative (2004). More effective opinion leaders for the Outback project might have been local UMWA leaders, Hocking College faculty not directly involved in the development of the project, or established tourism offices like county convention and visitors bureaus or the Wayne National Forest Center.
5.3 Lack of Consensus

Not only did the fervor of the Ohio Outback proponents, namely Tippett, lead to ineffectual diffusion, the results of this study show that power and the issue of “who decides” how the region should be marketed played a role in the way the Outback plan was received by the public. The previously mentioned editorials demonstrate at best, a lack of consensus and, at worst, indignation, toward the label “The Ohio Outback.” Within this study objections or apathy toward the Outback brand and plan were rarely made by citizens who wholly rejected change and development in the region, but rather those who disagreed with this particular plan.

Developing the plan through Hocking College seemed a wise idea because of the influence that rural community colleges possess in their regions. However, due to the long and controversial tenure of the Light administration and the inability to unite the faculty and staff behind the initiative, the college’s influence could not be wielded to achieve positive results and, in the end, may have contributed to the failure of the program. The control that Hocking College leaders possessed over the steering of the Outback project represented an institution attempting to take control of the destiny of the region, possibly reminiscent of the heavy hand of extractive industries. Although the motives of Hocking College leaders were arguable purer than those of the coal companies who previously exerted control over local people, the leaders of Hocking College and the Outback project still represent the local elite. Rather than being portrayed as innovators, Light and Tippett are often portrayed in the media (recently in the previously cited articles regarding the state audit) as the
“establishment,” a label that does not lend itself to helping generate enthusiasm around their proposals.

Facing difficulty in motivating locals to support the Outback plan, Tippett argued that in order to move the Outback initiative forward, the best way to attract supporters was to educate them one person at a time, as he did with Trudy Massey (R. Tippett, personal communication, October 15, 2009). While he did achieve success with Massey and her business partner Mark Eckert, gaining momentum at that pace was difficult. Even with Massey, a strong proponent of the plan, a power dynamic was evident. Massey serves as a true warrior for her region, fighting to improve the lives of local people through her involvement in the Outback group, engaging with her local leaders, and assuming leadership positions within Morgan County. Still, the rhetoric and tenor of our conversation revealed her commitment to the Ohio Outback project to be more in the form of discipleship to Tippett rather than collaboration.

This study also revealed that at the same time that the group at Hocking College was attempting to spread the Outback brand, other organizations promoting similar tourism and economic development initiatives were developing marketing strategies with little awareness of the Outback project (ACEnet 2009; ACCVB 2010). As Massey pointed out, she had difficulty convincing the Morgan County Convention and Visitors Bureau to stray from their own strategy. Morgan County leaders wanted the county marketed as an arts and heritage center, not a hunting and outdoors destination, and did not see enough regional collaboration taking shape to
warrant involvement with the Outback project (T. Massey, personal communication, October 15, 2010). ACEnet, a non-profit organization operated out Athens, Ohio focused largely on business incubation and venture loans was putting its resources toward incubating and marketing specialty foods businesses. While some of their other focuses are in line with the aims of the Ohio Outback project, they have not worked together despite the fact that ACEnet has been conducting development work in the region for over 25 years, including the operation of a business incubator in Nelsonville (ACEnet 2009).

The lack of collaboration between ACEnet and the Ohio Outback leadership is particularly surprising because ACEnet is the birthplace of Regional Flavor Strategies. Regional Flavor Strategies (RFS) emphasize capitalizing on the unique features of rural places, much like the goals of the Outback project (RFS 2010). RFS has grown into a national network of rural economic development leaders including both governmental and non-governmental non-profit organizations working to advance initiatives not unlike the Ohio Outback (RFS 2010).

This lack of cohesion in the region and inability to find a way to work together has plagued the Ohio Outback since its inception. Both Massey and Tippett lament the difficulty in getting local people to work together, but neither acknowledged that part of the problem might have been the leaders or the plan they conceived. They both operated under the assumption that if community members worked to implement the Ohio Outback project they would be working for the
“common good” (R. Tippett and T. Massey, personal communication, October 15, 2009).

5.4 Harnessing Passion for Place

Another issue this study uncovered relates to the attachment of local people to southeast Ohio. Because most residents possess deep roots in the region and have persevered for generations through poverty and hard times, they have developed a close relationship to the region, the land, and its people. The Ohio Outback project attempted to use that connection local people feel to the region and the knowledge they have to entice others to Appalachian Ohio for tourism. However, there is a disconnect between how local people perceive their region and how outsiders see it.

Robertson (2006) explains that even devastated landscapes like southeast Ohio retain meaning for those local people, but those meanings are varied. The problem demonstrated by this study is the difficulty in distilling these varied meanings into a singular brand. This requires a consensus on what elements of the region should be marketed to attract visitors. When I asked Tippett what makes the region unique enough to attract visitors, he responded that marketing the region as the Ohio Outback does (R. Tippett, personal communication, October 15, 2009). Tippett believes that marketing the spectrum of activities and history of the region and unifying the counties under his label will be sufficient to draw outsiders to Appalachian Ohio. The simplicity of this plan and the inability to unite local people
around it demonstrates a failure to harness the passion people have for their region into a successful economic development strategy.

Connection to place can be powerful, but this study demonstrates that strong feelings for a place do not necessarily translate into community cohesion. The people of Appalachian Ohio possess differing lived experiences, largely based on class difference. This is supported by statistics presented earlier in this thesis related to income and education attainment. Additionally, disparity between classes can be seen anecdotally on the landscape of southeast Ohio through the vast differences in home structures and economic disparity I observed in the WIC health clinic.

Evidence of this lack of cohesion has played out in the media regarding Hocking College, in the editorials aimed at the Ohio Outback, and in the myriad plans in place to improve the economy of southeast Ohio from different organizations. The hardships and power differentials of mining between the company elites and the miners in southeast Ohio provided the original glue that bound the people of the region together. As the economy of the region has diversified, evidence has emerged of shifting partnerships and power-players in the region. From Town Centre Inc. and Hocking College’s partnership in the late 1990s to the current partnership of ACEnet and Nelsonville Main Street, the diversity of ideas and sources of funding to back those ideas has affected the success of the Ohio Outback (OOTF 2002; ACEnet 2009). As the sense of what personifies Appalachian Ohio changes with the shift away from coal mining, conflict naturally ensues over who
will determine the new “official” message of place relayed to those inside and outside the region.
CHAPTER 6
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Importance of Research

Not unlike other regions in the United States that have experienced a history of extraction on their landscape, Appalachian Ohio is a recovering environment facing an immediate need to diversify its economy. As the landscape of southeast Ohio regreens, local people are formulating new plans for economic development in the region that capitalizes on the desire of “city folk” to vacation close to home in a rural, natural setting (McSweeney & McChesney 2004). This thesis has examined the work of one organization, the Ohio Outback group, and how they attempted to brand their region in hopes of attracting visitors and improving the local economy.

This research is important because the processes occurring in the region are not unique to southeast Ohio. The non-success of the Ohio Outback group contains lessons pertaining to the difficulties of rural economic development in general. Their story also speaks to the agency rural people and the variety of feelings tied to rural places. The rich history of this region, from the origin of the UMWA in New Straitsville to the passion citizens have demonstrated over the plans for this regions’ future, prove that these people are far from complacent. Contained within these
pages are examples of conflict and politics in a rural setting, but also a narrative of action and care for place.

Additionally, this research combines three literatures that rarely reference one other to explain the processes occurring in places like Appalachian Ohio. Innovation diffusion, political ecology, and sense of place literatures were used in tandem to create the theoretical background of this research. The research also contributes to education literature regarding the influence of community colleges in rural settings, and the challenges faced by those within the colleges attempting to carry out economic development, the “unfunded mission” of rural community colleges.

The next section of this chapter, 6.2, will discuss the findings of this study. The last two sections will discuss the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research related to this study.

6.2 Summary of Findings

McSweeney and McChesney touted the Ohio Outback project as a grass roots re-imagining of a recovering rural landscape (2004). While this certainly was a goal of the leaders of the Ohio Outback initiative, the findings of this study indicate that the project was not as successful as was originally imagined. The analysis presented in the previous chapter demonstrated that, although the leaders of the Outback project have yet to abandon their idea, they have experienced little success thus far. This study found that the complexity of regional collaboration, the inability to reach consensus on a brand for the region, and the zealousness and suspected corruption
of Outback leaders resulted in a failure of the initiative to unite Appalachian Ohio under a singular moniker.

The findings illuminate processes occurring in rural regions like Appalachian Ohio and highlight the political and power relationships at play. This study offers insight into the role of rural institutions and government entities in control over how a region markets itself to those outside the region and the meanings assigned to those labels. Finally, the study demonstrated how differing lived experiences in the same place lead to disparate ideas about the region. Although each subject within the research signaled that they feel a connection to Appalachian Ohio, each person’s experiences resulted in a different view of the region. The mixed-meanings related to this rural landscape prevented the Outback group (and other groups working in the region) from reaching a consensus on a label and creating a cohesive marketing strategy for the region.

6.3 Limitations of the Study

There were a number of factors that limited this study. One of those was the abstract nature of the initiative under examination. The Ohio Outback project is a loosely bound program that has experienced fluid changes in community support. Although there were specific goals set forth in the Ohio Outback Progress Report, the leaders of the project purposefully designed the initiative to have a wide umbrella that accepted all who would like to unite under the auspices of the ‘outback’ name. Because of this it was at time difficult to determine which
community development successes could be directly attributed to the Outback project and which they claimed simply because they were successful.

Another limiting factor was the number of interviews I was able to complete. Although I gleaned rich information from the subjects I was able to interview, I became lost in the complexity of the project. Had I conceived of a more specific research question for investigation sooner in the research process, I might have conducted more, shorter interviews to enhance the research.

Finally, this research was limited by the timing of the research. In 2009 when I began conducting interviews with Hocking College faculty and staff, the college was in a state of transition. In the summer of 2009, John Light’s contract ended and Ron Erickson took over the helm as president of Hocking College. One of the major issues uncovered in this research was how the corruption and suspicions of wrongdoing by Hocking College officials affected the success of the Ohio Outback project. Some of my interviewees alluded to the fact that bigger problems were brewing within the college, but seemed hesitant to share more. As the trouble at Hocking College has gained publicity in the news media in both southeast Ohio and Columbus, I think that interviewees may have been more likely to talk about the problems within the administration without fears of retribution. At the time of the interviews, the subjects were not sure how the Erickson administration would approach the controversy over Light’s administration. Now a year into the Erickson administration, his actions have shown that he has face the controversy head-on,
and interviews conducted today might have provided a deeper look into the Outback leadership.

6.4 Suggestions for Future Research

The complex nature of the Ohio Outback project leaves much to be explored in Appalachian Ohio. One of the major forces generating new economic opportunities in southeast Ohio is the non-profit organization ACEnet based in Athens, Ohio (ACEnet 2009). This study could be expanded to compare the non-success of the Ohio Outback project to the organization and work of ACEnet, an organization touted as a success to non-profit regional developers by the national network promoting Regional Flavor Strategies. Appalachian Ohio is the birthplace of the Regional Flavor Strategies initiative, but, unlike ACEnet, the Outback group has never been involved in the RFS network. It would be interesting to examine whether ACEnet has truly been successful or if it is another instance of outsiders touting their progress to be greater than is evidenced. Researching the Rural Flavor Strategies network would be useful as well, to investigate the advantages of national collaboration in rural development.
References


