Coles Bay and the Freycinet Peninsula: A case study of a community’s cultural and economic relations with the natural environment

Coles Bay is a small coastal community adjacent to Freycinet Peninsula on the east coast of Tasmania, Australia, where community and environment together form a geographical and social entity within distinct natural boundaries. To explore the relationships between community, economy and ecology at this site a theory of cultural-economic relations is tested. Hence, the research is motivated by a set of assumptions and understandings about the depth of people’s entangled relationships to place which are too complex to reduce to a hypothetical research question. Using the structure of a case study, the project is informed by Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of cultural capital, and is guided by his postulation of the character of the ‘field’ in social research. It is grounded in socio-cultural studies of place and community, ecological economics and environmental theory, and is framed in terms of the types of capital deemed most apposite for this study - cultural, economic and natural. Three populations compromising the communities associated with this place - long term residents, repeat holiday visitors and single visit tourists - are identified and examined.

In the study site, the complexity of the relationships of people to place is revealed, and Coles Bay and the Freycinet Peninsula are confirmed as a field of competition between cultural capital and economic capital over the use of natural capital. The results show the relationships between cultural, economic and natural capital are also seen to operate outside the study site within communities of interest, in structures of governance and in private enterprise.

Although the dynamics of the social, economic and environmental realities of Coles Bay and the Freycinet Peninsula are complex and interlinked, their viable management constitutes a strategic model for any small community of similar character and location facing similar challenges into the future.