

## **Culture, law, and nature in the Deschutes River basin: A place-based framework for understanding the legal structuring of landscapes**

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A growing number of scholars are interested in the intersection between law and geography. Yet most geographic analyses of the legal structuring of landscape focus either on the spatial impacts of specific laws or on the ways in which law reflects and shapes human spatial understandings and behavior. As a result, these studies fall short of considering how law mediates human relations with “place” – a material and perceptual construction created at the intersection of culture, society, and nature.

Addressing the dynamic qualities of place in law-geography studies requires that law be seen as a codification of cultural values and beliefs that contributes to the creation and evolution of the material landscape. Viewed thusly, the legal principles and specific laws that produce landscape change can be seen as constituent elements of the cultural attributes of place. In addition, addressing the dynamic qualities of place confirms the power of the landscape experience in the evolution of culture and society by acknowledging the role of landscape in structuring human identity and legal practice.

An analysis of landscape change in the Deschutes River Basin of central Oregon demonstrates the importance of a place-based approach to the law-geography nexus. The character of the Deschutes River Basin has been profoundly altered by humans over the last 150 years, and law has played a significant role in that process. Six case studies of landscape change in the basin show that viewing law merely as an external force acting on the landscape or as a reflection of human social structures and patterns fails to elucidate the powerful cultural myths embodied in the intersection between law and landscape. Conceptualizing law as a means by which culture is articulated in a place, and landscape as a means by which nature is incorporated into culture, enables us to focus on the role of law in creating place, and the role of place in mediating the relationship between culture and nature.