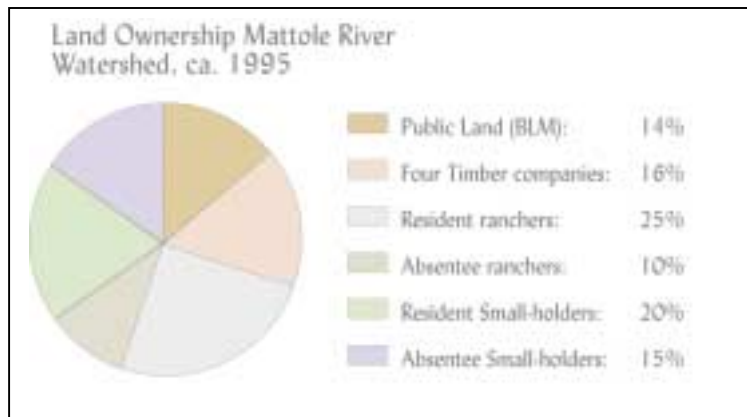


**Briefly summarize your research problem (include any hypotheses) and the goals of your research.**

### Overview

My research integrates concepts and methods from several disciplines, including ecology and historical ecology, environmental history, conservation biology and geography. The central questions guiding my research include, How can we understand historical scales of socio-ecological stability and change? How can we link these to understandings of human conceptions of place, identity, community and relations with the environment?

In particular, I am conducting doctoral research into these dynamics and relationships in the Mattole River Valley, of coastal northwestern California. Private lands dominate the region, with resident and absentee non-industrial and industrial lands split roughly equally with regard to percent land ownership (see Figure 1). This creates a compelling stakeholders' landscape of collaboration, checks and balances.



Since the late 1970s, diverse place-based community groups and individual residents in the Mattole have undertaken assessments of historical and contemporary land-use practices in order to understand changes to biological and ecological systems, populations, communities, and their interactions. Specifically, these resident groups have struggled to understand why salmonid populations have significantly

decreased, and how human efforts at restoration might improve salmon habitat and survivorship rates. Their reasons for undertaking these efforts have ranged from economic utility and self-interest to ethical responsibility for reversing ecological degradation. Throughout these two decades, these activities have brought local residents and their place-based community groups into conflict and cooperation, and to the fore of community-based ecosystem management (CBEM) efforts in the American West.

### Research Goals

I spent seven weeks in the Mattole River Valley in Spring, 2001, in order to examine historical and contemporary information sources regarding human land practices and environmental relations in the region. Several broad, open questions framed my initial inquiry:

- With regard to environmental and land health, what has changed in the region, and why? What has persisted, and why?
- What stories do residents tell about how local land uses practices and values have changed and persisted?
- How have residents and their complex and evolving community relations engaged in community-based ecosystem management? What have been their successes and set backs, and how do they define these?

As I prepared to go to the Mattole, my working refrain to colleagues was, "I want to write an environmental history of the Mattole." I considered it essential that I undertake a longer-term historical approach to understanding recent events and relationships in the region. Only then could I bring to the fore deep-seated values, practices and differences that were defining local understanding of the Mattole's problems, and that were driving both collaboration and conflict over the future of the Mattole's social and ecological well being.

By the time I finished my preliminary field and archival assay in mid-June, I realized that I had a second, equally important project before me. This project focused on the Mattole's most recent generation of environmental problems and human attempts at mitigation and restoration. Such a finer-grained focus would show how Mattole residents have developed their place-based efforts at ecological understanding and restoration on behalf of the watershed's ecology and the economy. This second, and equally important, project came to the fore through the implementation of a multi-agency program called NCWAP, the North Coast Watershed Assessment Program. Analyzing NCWAP in the context of the Mattole's efforts would offer another perspective on residents' efforts at CBEM, especially in their relations with resource management agencies. It would also help to frame a baseline for beginning a comparative study of other watersheds and CBEM groups in the greater region.

**Describe your field experience and data collection experience. Include a discussion of how your participatory research worked out.**

### **Field and Data Collection**

I lived for seven weeks in the lower part of the Mattole River Valley, with about five two- and three-day trips to Eureka (the county seat) and to Arcata (the home of Humboldt State University's regional archives) in order to visit archives and to introduce myself to local state and federal resource managers. I also made a couple of short visits to the upper parts of the

Mattole River watershed, mostly to interview people and to glimpse the upper watershed's biogeography.

Along with general wandering along the river, traveling roads and walking a couple of pieces of property (with permission!), I conducted seventeen formal (though mostly open-ended) interviews with residents (especially with the few octogenarians and nonagenarians still alive), resource managers, Earth First! protesters, registered professional foresters, and others. I also had numerous informal chats with residents at various functions.

The Mattole is home to a thriving community of local non-profit organizations involved in CBEM, and I interviewed each. These include the Mattole Restoration Council, the Mattole Salmon Group, the Buckeye Conservancy (serving Humboldt County), the Mattole Valley Historical Society, the Mill Creek Conservancy, Sanctuary Forest, and the Mattole School (an alternative, ecology-based middle and high school with a varying history of dormancy and activity since the early 1980s).

I had two co-dominant goals for my data collection efforts. First, I wanted to assay what kinds of materials, both historical and contemporary, might be available for describing the socio-economic and ecological history of the Mattole River and the larger region. I found two important public archives, both of which contain primary and secondary sources of information on the Mattole.

The second goal was to interview residents, especially old-timers, whose living memory includes stories from grand- and great-grandparents who first settled and fought the so-called Indian Wars in the 1850s and 1860s. These old-timers come from fourth- and fifth-generation ranch families who still work their property, and whose stories are essential to any historical and contemporary analysis of the relations between humans and the land in the region. Gaining access to their stories was thus essential, as was gaining their trust. Like many ranching families and communities in the American West, these Mattole residents have felt themselves and their ways of life on the defensive for a couple of decades now. I wanted to present myself as an unthreatening researcher sympathetic to their history and situation. I think I succeeded in this, if only to the degree that no one turned away my request for an interview.

I kept my interviews general, without formal survey instruments, forms or standardized questions. I wanted to meet residents in their homes, on their terms, and without dry and objectifying (yet sometimes necessary) tools of formal observation and data collection. For this reason I did not even use a tape recorder. Assembling standardized data sets will be important at some point, but I decided that I will use such tools only after residents became familiar with me and with telling me their stories.

**Participatory Research**

I have long known about participatory research and the broadly based model, from anthropology, of the position of the participant – observer in undertaking long-term research in a community.

My modest understanding of this dual (and sometimes conflicting) position, however, did little to prepare me emotionally for what I was undertaking. It is true that I had already had the good fortune of meeting a couple of Mattole residents involved in CBEM; they had welcomed me because of my well-intentioned research plans. Beyond this initial contact, however, I was entering a new community as a complete stranger, and I worried constantly about how I would fit in as both insider and outsider. I was about to ask people to share with a stranger their family and personal histories. In addition, I was especially worried about how I would maintain honesty about my research into the ecological and human history of the region and yet not alienate myself from residents with different values about the relationship of resources, land use, and the economics vs. environment tension.

I thus had modest participatory action research goals for my visit. Most of these focused on meeting residents and organizations, learning about contemporary issues from their perspectives, learning their family and community history, letting them know that I would be there, and would be back, to continue my research.

I have since begun to develop participatory goals with Mr. Chris Larson, the Executive Director of the Mattole Restoration Council (MRC). While these goals are still general, they include:

- Extending the MRC's and the region's knowledge base regarding its ecological history. This ranges from assisting in the continuing collection and analysis of baseline salmon population and habitat data to undertaking archival research in far-flung cities that contain documents regarding the Mattole's resource-extraction history.
- Helping residents and their community groups to assess NCWAP-generated materials and findings. That is, NCWAP will make socio-ecological information on the Mattole available to everyone, but it will not provide anyone with assistance in *analyzing* this information. Nor will it provide the tools and means for challenging conventional (or the state's) assessments and proposals for restoration.
- Helping the Mattole Valley Historical Society gather, compile, and make available historical materials now in storage in residents' homes and the MVHS office. My continuing contribution to this part of my collaboration includes helping the MVHS better foreground the rich history of land-use, not just collecting materials on families and individuals.

- A final possible relationship involves collaborating with the local public school on some projects. I began my professional life with a certification to teach secondary social studies, and enjoy teaching about land, ecology and community.

These four points illustrate a compelling realization during my stay in the Mattole. I cannot undertake effective participatory research if I limit my relationship to one organization, especially when many residents have a reluctant relationship with that organization (the MRC). I don't mean at all to suggest that the MRC is a weak, contentious, or problematic organization. Rather, the MRC's work keenly illustrates the complexities of CBEM among individuals, families and communities whose traditions and values have historically often been at odds. The MRC has worked hard to build bridges among these diverse residents, and I believe (and I think the folks at MRC would agree) that I too must build strong bridges and relations well beyond the confines of any one group.

In this light, I plan to develop a working relationship with the Buckeye Conservancy, a new group serving Humboldt County. Buckeye collaborates with non-industrial private ranch and forestland owners in Humboldt County in order to develop conservation easements, land trusts, and other mechanisms by which these families can continue ecologically and economically responsible land stewardship. Though new, the Buckeye Conservancy has already made strong contacts with the diverse residents and groups in the Mattole. I have yet to consider how I might be of help to Buckeye, but I do know that its members carry four and five generations of history, and persistence, of making a livelihood and community in the region. I would compromise my research, and do a great disservice to the Mattole's residents and history, were I to ignore this important organization.

**Discuss your preliminary findings and analysis. How do they relate to your original goals/hypotheses?**

Three words help to frame my original goals and my preliminary findings from my stay in the Mattole: intention, circumstance, and serendipity.

I have outlined my original research intentions, above, and thus will limit myself to adding that I now have a working narrative of the major periods, events, and practices in historical and contemporary human – environment relations in the Mattole. I am currently developing this narrative as the central part of my dissertation proposal in the Department of Geography at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. As such, I achieved one of my research expectations: finding a rich enough set of archival and field evidence to frame my research through history, not just through a contemporary study.

Circumstance describes several of the archival and personal contacts I made during my research, as well as the overall timing of my project. With regard to the latter, to date no one has attempted a synthesis of the diverse human and non-human stories about the Mattole, something that several people found encouraging. That is, many want their story (I hasten to tell them that it is *stories!*) told, both near- and long-term.

Finally, serendipity points to how easily researchers may stumble into rich information sources. Such sources, both human and material, abound in the Mattole and Humboldt County. A second fortuitous encounter is the timing of my research with the implementation of the NCWAP process. NCWAP will foreground – both politically and administratively – the restoration efforts of the Mattole’s citizens, as well as the efforts of various state and federal agencies charged with managing lands for economic and ecological abundance, in perpetuity. The stakeholders’ table, issues and processes are now at the fore of local and regional news. And, as I have already mentioned, because of the presence of the NCWAP process in the region, I plan to lay groundwork for a longer-term comparative study of watersheds, CBEM groups, and their efforts at ensuring a healthy ecology and economy in their homes.

Finally, while I knew intellectually that I was stepping into a world far more complex than my visits will ever comprehend, I came away surprised and heartened by the many twists of fortune and leaps of faith that residents have taken, especially in recent years. I have heard stories of people, from many sides of the Mattole’s problems, stepping outside of their conventional community alliances and values in order to build a bridge for collaboration. These efforts are especially compelling when they come from multi-generation ranchers, who in recent decades have borne a fairly large share of criticism (internally and externally) for using today management practices that seemed to work in the past. Many community stakeholder groups – both place-based and conviction- or interest-based – exist today that did not exist thirty years ago. That these ranching families have persisted in the face of this complexity is both laudable and promising.

Doing justice to the complexity of these and other relations will occur best through a rich telling of the many stories of intentions, circumstances, and serendipity – both good and bad – of the Mattole’s residents as they seek to understand a past and to create a future of enduring economic and ecological abundance.

### **What is the benefit of your research to the community?**

When people ask me what a geographer does, I reply that I am literate in many languages, and that my primary concern is to offer a synthesis of these diverse voices. These voices are based in many local and regional communities, and they are also the voices of different research traditions, from ecology and resource management to history and anthropology. In this light, one

of my contributions to the Mattole is simply to gather together the voices of these histories, values and practices into a coherent story of human and ecological relationship, stability and change.

This basic contribution to the community is, of course, a selfish one, for what I have outlined neatly frames contributions that also aid my doctoral research. The greater mystery is what day-

to-day contributions I might make to the Mattole and its communities. I have outlined above several “point-of-departure” projects which MRC and I think will be useful. In each case, my goal is to contribute, and even to offer a different view if I think it is useful to the question or issue at hand. Such an approach is inherently participatory, and borders on participatory *action* research, a philosophy and method I find to be an even finer line to walk regarding the ethics of research. There is no neutrality in participatory action research, and in the case of the Mattole, there are no simple sides to take.

Indeed, I can imagine trying to bridge between these different communities, and in the process finding myself at the center of myriad perspectives on and contestations about the best path forward. In the Mattole I am more than an outsider (for I can come into the homes of residents and ask intimate questions about family history) but I am also not quite an insider (I don’t expect I will ever be invited over for dinner and a video). As such, there will be times when my status will be the worst of both worlds. I cannot say how I might proceed in such instances other than to listen carefully to why a problem exists, and to gauge what contribution I am making to the exacerbation, or solution, of the situation. I am comfortable with participatory research, but I need to exercise caution with regard to participatory *action* research.

I place a great deal of faith in the power of information, learning, re-assessment, and change. As such, the positive side of my neither / nor status in the Mattole is that I may be able to propose new ideas and new interpretations of information, precisely because I am an outsider with a passionate interest in the history and future of this place.<sup>1</sup> This also remains to be seen.

Finally, my research will help enrich and elaborate the complex ecological and human stories that have taken place in the Mattole, especially in the context of NCWAP and state authority and responsibility for effective resource management. That these stories may be gathered under one common binding and title excites many people there, including me. But it also will provide a new point of departure for re-thinking and re-evaluating the Mattole’s history and future. With patience and persistence, I hope to end up as another respected stakeholder at the table. This seems to me to be the quintessence of participatory action research.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, my research may uncover new information that takes historically cast (and entrenched) blame off of the shoulders of ranchers in the Mattole. Indeed, there is a moment, just after World War II, where such a smoking gun might lie, buried in the subtle associations of lumber kings and the County’s political leaders. For now, this is only a working hypothesis that needs more research.

**Lessons learned. Include any suggestions you may have for improving the CFRF program.**

What lessons have I taken from my preliminary field experience? The most fundamental is the complexity of everything, from fish to communities to individuals, from values to convictions to fears for the future. People live in place and they construct, maintain and defend the meanings that perpetuate their sense of home. How can I tell these meanings? What stories will I end up

leaving out because they don't fit well with my dissertation's conceptual framework? In this light, I learned that I probably have three projects: my research into the human and ecological history of persistence and change in the Mattole; research into contemporary CBEM practices, challenges and directions in the Mattole; and finding a way to return all of my insights to this community.

With regard to the CFRF Program, I would like first to celebrate a key part. I have found Carl Wilmsen to be engaging, accessible, and encouraging. He brings leadership to a program that is evolving as rapidly as community-based ecosystem management is. He gives enough guidance to help the program and its linkages diversify CBEM, but still seems to keep the central philosophy intact and directing the program.

The retreat is a wonderfully consuming (and thus transformative) experience, and the only thing I would add to is more time. Another half day would allow participants to muse and commiserate – on the volleyball court or on a streamside walk – about their encounters with new ideas, perspectives, and practices. I would also suggest that this extra half day include time for break-out sessions. In these separate discussion sessions fellows can meet together and community practitioners can meet together in order to discuss problems germane to their work. Both groups would be facilitated by Steering Committee members, advisors and the like.

Most of all, I would like to see a more central role for the community partners. This seems a difficult task, for it means balancing the needs of the fellows with finding ways that bring the community partners to the fore. Perhaps there could be a morning or afternoon in which regionally based community practitioners visit and discuss their issues. This may be a variation on the wonderful field trip we took, but it could include compelling stories and projects from local non-profits.

While I enjoyed reading (when there was time) the posters we prepared, they were quite time-consuming to make, and hard to return to as the retreat wore on. I would prefer a 5-6 page (or a 10-12 frame PowerPoint printout) synopsis for reading on the plane. The basic bulleted information is what we want most from these briefing papers, not the beautiful, but time-consuming, graphics.



John E. Isom

Pre-Dissertation Fellow  
15 February 2002

Final Report

Finally, it might be useful for us to submit our report soon after the retreat. This would be especially helpful for us to do while the retreat is still fresh on our minds.