

# Iconic Species and Sense of Place

**By Sarah Horsley**

*Iconic species are important because of the way they represent values of a community, such as conservation, cultural heritage, or their unique ecosystems. My research looks at what these values are and how they are embodied by iconic species in a case study of Jekyll Island, Georgia. While every community and iconic species is unique, my research aims to find the aspects of this process that may be shared broadly. Researching the live oak and sea turtle as Jekyll Island's most iconic species will allow us to understand what place-based management actions and planning decisions within the balance of community, tourism, and environmental protection might support or degrade the way an iconic species is valued and valuable within that place.*

## What is an iconic species?

“Iconic” is a status attributed to different species throughout conservation, marketing, and in everyday conversation. Iconic species are easy to see, but can be hard to define. When someone calls a species iconic, they often refer to the way a species might stand out as a symbolic representation of something valuable. This status is not based on any one particular trait and can be used for a wide range of species.

## Why do iconic species matter?

I am researching how the sea turtle and live oaks define the character of Jekyll Island. The social and environmental roles these species have contribute to a person’s overall sense of place, which are the connections they form with specific locations and the unique setting. These connections influence environmental attitudes, community identity, and a sense of well-being. Therefore, planning and management decisions that may affect iconic species could affect specific ways people form attachments with a place.

## METHODS

To understand how iconic species contribute to a sense of place, I am using mixed-methods research. To gain a grounding of the concept, I conducted interviews over the summer of 2017 with Jekyll Island visitors, residents, and employees. These interviews helped me understand which

## Significance

This study:

- Tests ways of evaluating the specific values provided by iconic species so they can be considered alongside other values within decision-making processes.
- Identifies the specific characteristics of sea turtles and live oaks that contribute to Jekyll Island’s sense of place, allowing planners and marketers to leverage and protect their value as an iconic species.
- Provides data on how groups may value the species differently, informing opportunities to frame management outreach efforts, education/ interpretation, and marketing effectively to many people.
- Informs how management and planning can protect symbolic values and strengthen community character through ecological conservation efforts with iconic species.
- Assesses how environmental behaviors of residents and tourists are affected by a sense of place that may be strengthened through the presence of iconic species.

species are most iconic, what that means to different people, and the many ways these species are valued. Among the 27 total species named by participants, the live oak and sea turtle were named by far most frequently.

From this input, I created a survey that is being distributed in 2018 and 2019 to residents and tourists of Jekyll Island. This survey measures how the sea turtle and live oak factor into attitudes of attachment people have toward Jekyll Island. I am also testing how these attitudes influence environmental behavior, both in general and specific to conservation of those species. For residents, this survey also measures how those species influence a sense of empowerment and for tourists, how their attitudes towards those species influence their decisions to visit. From this information, I hope to better predict how iconic species marketing and conservation may influence these attitudes and behaviors.

I am following up the survey research with a participant-photography qualitative study on how iconic species and natural features are seen within the visual landscapes by residents and tourists. Examining how these stakeholders frame, interpret, and value physical aspects of the landscape will help inform the design and management of these places. For example, the iconic live oaks may inspire different modes of appreciation and interaction if they are framed by a landscaped historic district or in the context of a maritime forest. Additionally, I will investigate how the iconic status of these species and natural features may hinder or promote these stakeholders' understandings of the surrounding ecological dynamics to which these icons are subject, which can inform environmental education and interpretation opportunities.

### Place Based Management

Place-based management recognizes the ways identity, meanings, and values define the specific ways people interact with their surroundings. Planning with these considerations in mind can help managers understand how decisions will affect the people who live in or care about a place.



*While the sea turtle can easily be seen symbolically across Jekyll Island, the real turtles are difficult to see. Their presence is most often framed by conservation efforts, including marked nests and rehabilitated sea turtles released back to the ocean.*

### A PRELIMINARY FINDING

2/3 of first-time island visitors and half of returning visitors planned to visit live oaks on this trip. 75% of tourists who visited the live oaks on a past trip intended to visit them again. There is an intention to experience the live oaks from first-time visitors as well as a “staying power” for return visitors. As tourists develop relationships by experiencing the oaks first hand, they may expect to be able to visit certain trees each time they return. As notable trees reach the end of their life, there may need to be interpretive signage allowing visitors to understand changes and ‘grieve.’



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