
Living Memorials: Understanding the Social Meanings of Community-Based Memorials to September 11, 2001

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Erika S. Svendsen¹
and Lindsay K. Campbell¹

Abstract

Living memorials are landscaped spaces created by people to memorialize individuals, places, and events. Hundreds of stewardship groups across the United States of America created living memorials in response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. This study sought to understand how stewards value, use, and talk about their living, community-based memorials. Stewards were asked to describe the intention, use, and meanings of the memorials. Qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis were used to analyze 117 semi-structured interviews. Sacredness of space varied by a memorial's site type and uses. This and other findings supported the notion of sacred space as contested space. Sacred space can be produced from acts of "setting aside" that ascribe meaning to a memorial site.

Keywords

sacred space, memorial, September 11, civic stewardship, prememorial period

¹U.S. Forest Service, Northern Research Station

Corresponding Author:

Erika S. Svendsen, U.S. Forest Service, Northern Research Station, 290 Broadway,
26th Floor, New York, NY 10007
Email: esvendsen@fs.fed.us

Living memorials are landscaped spaces created by people to memorialize individuals, places, and events (Svendsen & Campbell, 2005). They can be found on publicly accessible sites such as forests, town squares, community gardens, and the public right of way. Common examples include single tree plantings and parks. Hundreds of stewardship groups across the United States of America created living memorials in response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks when four commercial airplanes were hijacked and used as weapons to attack sites of national significance. Much public attention and a growing body of scholarly research have examined the creation of national memorials at the three September 11 airplane crash sites. Despite their abundance and visibility, community-based sites that emerged independent of the three national memorials are less well known and understood. First, what are the social meanings of local, landscape-based memorials that are created earlier than national, state-sponsored memorials? Second, to what extent are these sites considered sacred by their creators or stewards? Third, how does sacredness vary by memorial site type?

Memorials in the Landscape

Memory often takes on a spatial form, with its genesis being both individual and societal (Halbwachs, 1941). Lewis Mumford (1961), in his *The City in History*, argues that burial grounds, shrines, cairns, and other sacred sites (e.g., groves, forests) served as the nuclei of human establishments because they provided cultural magnets and prominent sites to which our nomadic ancestors would return. However, scholars of memory argue that memory is active and part of life, as opposed to a historical artifact (Harrison, 2003; Hobsbawm, 1983; Nora, 1989).

The interpretive labor that goes into making a sacred space determines the symbolic order and design of sacred space (Chidester & Linenthal, 1995; Thomas, 1996). Memorial scholars have explored how interpretive acts like ceremonies, pilgrimages, and ritual acts of consecration create webs of meaning that continually redefine and intertwine the sacred and the profane. Memorials are media for these interpretive acts. Through their use of memorials, people reproduce and reinterpret national and cultural heritage in light of current actions, events, and attitudes (Foote, 1997; Hoelscher & Alderman, 2004; Mayo, 1988; Young, 1994). Consequently, a memorial's meaning may shift (Connerton 1989; Van Gennep, 1960).

To uncover their evolving meanings, memorial sites can be read as cultural texts (Berger, 1972; Cosgrove, 1984; Sauer, 1925). For example, Foote (1997) explored instances of contestation and commemoration during which sacredness did not follow an expected narrative or timeline. For example, a memorial to victims of Pearl Harbor was conceived soon after the tragedy.

However, the memorial was not constructed until after the naval base was deactivated and issues of shame and national identity were resolved.

Entangling of the Sacred and Profane

Multiple and competing interpretations of faith and belief question whether there is a universal definition of the sacred and how it is expressed. The notion of sacred space has traditionally been characterized by what is holy, powerful, constant, and centralized (Eliade, 1959). However, contemporary memorial scholars have challenged the view of a dichotomy between the sacred and the profane. Research of American memorials suggests that the sacred is entangled with the profane (Chidester & Linenthal, 1995). In general, Americans are comfortable with representations of the sacred extending beyond spaces designated to contain them (e.g. churches, synagogues, mosques, cemeteries). This extension of space blurs the boundaries among the sacred, the commercial, and the political in everyday life (Nelson, 2006). Commemorative objects may be found in such places as traffic islands and transit stations where their meaning might not conform to tradition. Case in point, the Crucifix has become a common roadside memorial symbol rather than a specific representation of a Christian act of faith (Collins & Rhine, 2003).

Sacredness can be represented by the natural elements that surround a memorial. Images, symbols, and physical places that represent the natural elements convey religious tenets often associated with life, death, and rebirth (Rival, 1998). For example, trees and gardens are iconic images associated with renewal and the life cycle (Foote, 1997; Jackson, 1996). Indian, Japanese, and African cultures have traditions of honoring sacred forests, groves, and mountains (Berbaum, 2006; Chandrashekara & Sanka, 1998; Lebbie & Freudenberger, 1996; Manabe, Ishii, & Ito, 2007). In Western cultures, parks and gardens signify a public, human-stewarded nature that may be critical for a community's healing following a tragic event (Chidester & Linenthal, 1995; Foote, 1997; Young, 1994).

Collected Memory, Community-Based Memorials, and the Prememorial Period

The public process of planning memorials helps local communities come to terms with a tragedy. Scholars have emphasized the importance of the time period before a formal or state-led memorial is created—the “prememorial period.” During the period, the community deliberates social meanings and competing historical narratives to be communicated by a memorial (Simpson & Corbridge, 2006). Thus, it is natural for social tensions to arise (Bosco, 2004;

Sturken, 2004; White, 2004). Though fraught with contention, the planning of the memorial reaffirms a sense of community and provides an opportunity for catharsis.

Young (1994) has suggested that time is needed for public discourse or “memory work” because it is critical for a community’s recovery from a tragedy. Memory work is a process for voicing an emergent “collected memory” (Young, 1994). As such, collected memory challenges the traditional notion that memorials represent a unified collective memory. There is concern that the current trend to accelerate memory work by instituting plans to memorialize immediately after the tragic event stunts public discourse over the event. Memorials to the Vietnam War and the murder of civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., are examples of events given a substantial amount of time for discourse and debate before a permanent memorial was built (Foote, 1997; White, 2004).

Rules and hierarchies determine who has access to and control of sacred space (Van der Leeuw, 1986). However, the ways social groups deal with the loss of control that accompanies unforeseen tragic events may not conform to official rules (Collins & Rhine, 2003; Haney, Leimer, & Lowery, 1997). For example, spontaneous memorials are often positioned near the site of tragic events and differ from what was originally intended by the state, private owners, or the public (Foote, 1997; Mayo, 1988).

The Stewardship of Memory

The making and caretaking of memorials sites can be understood in the broader context of environmental stewardship. There exists a vibrant civic environmentalism in the United States that consists of individuals and groups who steward the landscape by incorporating elements of civic education, self-efficacy, and community capacity-building. These individuals and groups proactively manage and plan sections of landscapes for sustainability in urban and rural areas (Agyeman & Angus, 2003; Andrews & Edwards, 2005; Burch & Grove, 1993; Carmin 1999; Dalton, 2001; Weber, 2000; Westphal 1993).

In this study, we sought to understand how stewards value, use, manage, and talk about their landscape-based memorials to September 11, 2001. As such, an aim of the study was to explore how local memorials exhibited properties of emergent or ascribed sacredness based on community use. The study’s three primary research questions were the following: What are the social meanings of local, landscape-based memorials in the prememorial period? To what extent are these sites considered sacred by their creators or stewards? How does sacredness vary by a memorial’s site type?

Method

Identification of Stewardship Groups

Initial participants were identified through a purposive sample of 38 stewardship groups. Additional groups were identified using a snowball sampling method during which interviewees were asked to identify other memorial groups and sites with which they were familiar (Lofland & Lofland, 1984). This information was combined with a newspaper search, starting in the metropolitan areas of the three crash sites (New York, Shanksville, PA, and Arlington, VA/Washington, DC) and then extending to the entire Northeast United States of America. A nationwide newspaper database search was conducted, leading to a total of 687 identified sites.

Field Method

Field methods for the research project included semi-structured interviews, site observation, and photo documentation. This article utilized the interview data. The interviews were guided by an assessment protocol that asked biophysical and social questions about the characteristics of the stewardship group and its memorial site. The protocol consisted of closed- and open-ended questions, including three questions that addressed the core social functions of memorial sites investigated for this study. These core social functions included memorial purpose, events held on-site, and sacredness.

Participants and Procedure

We interviewed a total of 117 stewardship groups. Of those 117 groups, multiple interview methods were used to collect the data. A total of 69 interviews were conducted at sites that we visited at least once. A total of 25 interviews were conducted by telephone with pictures of the site submitted electronically. Finally, 23 stewardship groups self-registered for the study by electronically submitting or mailing the interview protocol. Interviewees included civic stewards (usually working as part of a volunteer, community-based group), local municipal officials (who were either pursuing the projects as part of their official duties or in a volunteer capacity), and family members or friends of September 11 victims.

Qualitative Analysis

The three social functions of memorial sites were coded separately by two different researchers using an open coding scheme that identified key phrases,

patterns, and concepts (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Thematic clusters were then created to aggregate common codes together into broader themes. Thematic clusters emerged out of key phrases, repeated language, and common ideas (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Specific subcategories were retained. Then, initial codes were compared and discussed. Discrepancies were examined using an iterative approach until consensus was reached among the coders (Neuman, 2003).

In addition to the three core social functions of memorial sites, responses were coded by activities at the memorial. These included active (i.e., recreation, public events, and programming) or passive (i.e., viewing and quiet reflection) activities.

For site type, we created a typology of memorials based on field observations (Svendsen & Campbell, 2005). Sites were categorized into private property, parks, community gardens, forests, and found space. This typology was then further collapsed into the following categories: green space (i.e., forest, park, garden), civic grounds, found space, and private property.

Data Preparation for Quantitative Analysis

Following the qualitative analysis, data was prepared for quantitative analysis. The clusters of the three core social functions (i.e., memorial purpose, events held on-site, and sacredness) were re-coded as dummy variables. Consequently, the presence or absence of a cluster could be treated as a dichotomous yes or no variable. Stewards attributed sacredness to a number of different factors, listed multiple types of events, or offered multiple purposes for their memorial. Thus, frequencies for the three core social functions totaled more than 100%.

Results

Table 1 summarizes the frequencies of the three core social functions of memorial sites and site type. Frequencies of the subcategories are included.

Memorial Purpose

The core social function of memorial purpose fell into 10 primary clusters. The most prevalent purpose of a memorial was to *remember particular people who died* (coded as dummy variable M_PEOPLE). There was roughly an equal count of memorials created to honor all victims of September 11 and to

Table 1. Frequencies of Site Type, Memorial Purpose, Events Held On-Site, and Sacredness

Site Type	Frequency	Percentage
Green space	66	56.41
Civic grounds	34	29.10
Found space	13	11.11
Private property	4	3.49
Total	117	100
Memorial Purpose	Frequency	Percentage
Remember particular people	85	73.28
Encourage reflection/healing	52	44.83
Support community cohesion	34	29.31
Patriotism	27	23.28
Community use	26	22.41
Stewardship	25	21.55
Remember September 11/the day	19	16.38
Meaning will be determined over time	9	7.76
Design	5	4.31
Burial grounds	4	3.45
No response	1	.86
Events Held On-Site	Frequency	Percentage
Formal remembrance	73	66.36
Community use and events	52	47.27
Community stewardship/management	48	43.64
Passive/unprogrammed	36	32.73
Patriotic events	17	15.45
Burial	3	2.73
No response	7	6.36
Sacredness	Frequency	Percentage
Traditional sacredness	42	43.75
Not sacred for all/special	36	37.50
Community/individual meaning	30	31.25
Nature sacredness	29	30.21
Time will tell/lasting matters	26	27.08
Stewardship/care makes it sacred	24	25.00
Memorial use makes it sacred	22	22.92
Patriotic	5	5.21
No response	21	21.19

honor particular, local victim(s) of September 11. Memorials also recognized 9/11 recovery workers, survivors, and family members. There were memorials dedicated to victims from 9/11 and local tragedies other than 9/11 that blended commemorated events. Memorials were also intended to *encourage reflection and healing* (coded as dummy variable M_HEALREFLECT). Stewards considered these sites as tranquil spaces or sanctuaries to be used for reflection and contemplation. Others believed that sites could be healing spaces that are comforting, offer renewal, give solace, or allow people to confront their emotions. Some memorials were intended to support and *encourage community cohesion*. The purpose of several memorials was *patriotic* in nature, whereby the commemoration of September 11 was contextualized within the history of U.S. warfare. Other memorials were meant for *community use*, both as local memorials and as day-to-day open space. Some memorials were created to *remember September 11, the day* (as opposed to particular victims). A small number of memorials were created as *burial grounds*. There were a variety of other memorial meanings that were mentioned less frequently. These included *community stewardship, preservation*, and *restoration* and a sense that the meaning of sites would be determined *over time*.

So that we could understand how stewards' stated memorial purposes were expressed in the landscape, a series of crosstabs and Fishers exact probability tests were run between memorial purpose (M_HEALREFLECT and M_PEOPLE) and stewards' opinions as to whether their sites were interactive or passive. Fisher's exact probability test was preferred over chi-square analysis in this case because of small cell counts.

Memorials that were intended to support healing and reflection (M_HEALREFLECT) were more often interactive (58.7%) than passive (41.3%). This difference was statistically significant (2×2 Fisher's, $N = 104$, $p = .03$) at the $p < .05$ level. Conversely, memorials that were to commemorate people who died (M_PEOPLE) were more often passive (60%) than interactive (40%). This difference was statistically significant marginally (2×2 Fisher's, $N = 104$, $p = .05$) at the $p < .1$ level. Both commemoration and healing are components of memorial-making. However, these findings suggest that they might be expressed differently in the landscape.

Events Held On-Site

Stewards were asked to reflect on the planned use of their sites. *Formal remembrance* activities were by far the most common events held or planned

at these sites. These included dedication events and annual remembrances on September 11. Many groups held events involving uniformed recovery personnel and/or September 11 family members. Spiritual rituals including prayer, vigil, and meditation were planned uses. Stewards frequently referenced that their sites were intended for *community use and community events* (coded as dummy variable E_COMMUSE). Community use referred to recreational and educational activities that were held on-site. Community events occurred less frequently than community uses. The events were believed to help knit a community together through arts, celebration, or discussion. *Community stewardship and management*—including participatory design, project fundraising and hands-on care of a site—were also common. A number of sites were intended to be *passive or unprogrammed*. For these sites, stewards did not plan to have any active events; these sites were meant for viewing, reflection, relaxation, and quiet. Finally, a few respondents stated that sites would be used for *patriotic events*, for *burials*, or as *shrines*.

We examined the relationship between stated purpose of the memorial and whether or not community events were held on-site. Stewards who said the purpose of their memorials was to promote social cohesion (M_COHESION) were more likely to use their sites for community events (E_COMMUSE; 67.74%) than not (32.26%). This difference was statistically significant (2×2 Fisher's, $N = 109$, $p = .01$) at the $p < .05$ level. Similarly, memorials intended to promote healing and reflection (M_HEALREFLECT) were more likely to host community events (E_COMMUSE; 58%) than not (42%). This difference was statistically significant (2×2 Fisher's, $N = 109$, $p = .04$) at the $p < .05$ level. Those who stated the purpose of their memorial was patriotic—to honor the heroes, the military, or to show strength (M_PATRIOTIC)—were more likely not to hold community events (72%) than to hold them (28%). This difference was statistically significant (2×2 Fisher's, $N = 109$, $p = .04$) at the $p < .05$ level.

Sacredness

Stewards were asked whether and why they considered their memorials to be sacred. Overall, 76.2% of respondents said that they considered their memorials sacred, whereas 23.8% said they did not. Most stewards felt that their sites were sacred because the sites hosted *rituals that traditionally confer sacredness* on a landscape or because sites were related to hallowed ground or religious practices. The primary reason cited for sacredness was the act of memorial designation, of setting aside a space by a group of people. However, many stewards felt that their memorials were *not sacred*, at least not for

Table 2. Sacredness Versus Site Type Site Type^a

Sacred	Site Type			χ^2
	Civic Grounds	Found Space	Green Space	
No	8 (29.63%)	7 (53.85%)	10 (16.39%)	8.54*
Yes	19 (70.37%)	6 (46.15%)	51 (83.61%)	

a. N = 101.

*p < .01.

everyone. Of the respondents who said their site was sacred, nearly half of all respondents qualified that statement. They said that the sites may not be sacred for all and provided explanations of why sites were “special” or “significant.”

Stewards gave reasons other than religious rites or consecration that accounted for their memorial’s sacredness. Some believed that sites were sacred because they would have meaning to the community or to particular individuals or groups—such as 9/11 family members. A number of respondents believed that the presence of certain *natural features* and the natural lifecycle conferred sacredness on a site. Others believed that the *use of the memorial* was what made the site sacred. Some stewards noted that sacredness of a memorial is determined *over time*. Sites would be considered sacred if they lasted in perpetuity, were respected, not vandalized, and treated well. A similar theme emerged regarding the role of human *stewardship and care* in making a site sacred. Stewardship, restoration, and teaching were all mentioned as hands-on ways in which people made their sites sacred. Finally, a handful of respondents felt that *patriotic* symbols such as the flag, or proximity to previously consecrated war memorials, made their sites sacred.

We sought to understand how sacredness varies across physical sites and found a statistically significant relationship between sacredness and site type, $X^2 (2; N = 101) = 8.54, p = .02$, (See Table 2). Stewards of green space sites, which included forests, parks, and community gardens, were more likely to say that their sites were sacred (83.61%) than not (16.39%). Stewards of found space sites (e.g., traffic islands, street trees) usually found in the public right-of-way indicated that their sites were not sacred (53.85%). Finally, stewards of civic grounds, which included formal town centers, schools, libraries, police, and fire departments, were in-between the two extremes with 70.37% indicating their sites were sacred and 29.63% indicating that their sites were not.

Discussion and Conclusion

Social Meanings in the Prememorial Period

In the case of September 11, we found that communities are creating a large number of local memorials in the prememorial period. These local memorials demonstrate how different groups understand, remember, and contextualize September 11 in their communities and neighborhoods. Indeed, these memorials often support multiple agendas. For example, it was not uncommon for a site to provide space for quiet reflection and active recreation. Not unlike the work of Foote (1997), Chidester and Linenthal (1995), and Young (1994), we found that memorials represented multiple, layered, contested, and blended meanings.

We inferred two distinct types of memorials from what stewards told us about three core social functions of memorial sites (i.e., memorial purpose, events held on-site, and sacredness). The first group of memorials was constructed using patriotic icons such as flags and stone markers. They were often dedicated to specific persons or lists of those who died on September 11. Activities on these sites were more passive. Also, there was less opportunity to steward or change the design or nature of the formalized setting. We refer to these types of sites as “monument in park,” where the landscape is not the memorial core but serves as a backdrop for more formal design and activities. Indeed, not all living memorials were active community sites integrated into the fabric of daily life. Many stewards anticipated a memorial dedication and an annual remembrance, but no other events.

The other group of memorials encouraged reappropriation or varied community use of the site. We refer to these memorial sites as “park as memorial.” Multiple, emergent, and layered meanings were permitted through use of the site. The emphasis of the memorial site was on healing through community events, engagement, and discursive use of the space. These memorials were intended to promote community cohesion through interactive spaces where groups could hold public events, and reflection.

Stewardship was a behavior that reflected the need for continued public interaction and debate over the meaning of September 11. Also, stewardship resulted from a basic desire to “do something” in response to a tragic event that left many observers and witnesses feeling powerless.

Participatory planning and design were considered integral to the intent and function of the memorial sites. Some memorial stewards made donations to other community-reinforcing efforts and projects (such as 9/11 memorial scholarships, the Red Cross, or family support funds). Many memorials were created explicitly for staging intimate events with the intention of

strengthening a sense of community cohesion and to inspire on-going care and maintenance. Some stewards interviewed cited the feelings surrounding commemorative efforts, in that memorials were “created with love.” Community uses of the memorials were broad and diverse, but often included local events that commemorated 9/11, spontaneous or unplanned events, and teaching and recreation opportunities.

Finally, many stewards referenced the importance of actually caring for and working with nature. This suggested that environmental stewardship—the act of caring for the world around us—should be further explored as an emerging commemorative practice. As Young (1992, 1994) draws attention to the process of public memorial-making with art, design, and planning of a space, we found that the basic act of stewardship and interaction with a landscape is also critical to prememorial period discourse. Not unlike other forms of discursive action in the prememorial period, stewardship itself has multiple meanings.

Extent of Sacredness and Sacredness by Site Type

Our findings directly support the notion of a contested definition of the sacred—from a strict definition of sacred grounds as formally consecrated space to a broader understanding of the ways in which acts of “setting aside” can ascribe meaning to a site. Nearly all of the stewards conducted rituals of setting aside these sites. Some sites were used as burial grounds for human remains and September 11 crash site relics such as soil, debris, personal mementos, or steel from the WTC. Some sites were blessed by spiritual rituals including libations, mediation, and prayer. Symbolic stones that referenced the WTC towers, the Pentagon, or Flight 93 were considered sacred. The inscription of victims’ names and images on a site was thought to confer sacredness as well.

However, some of the memorials were sites of community events unrelated to September 11. For many respondents, the act of stewardship was precisely what made them consider their memorial sacred. These findings supported the need for on-going public engagement before, during, and after memorial dedication. The act of stewardship appeared to be one defining condition of sacredness.

However, it is important to note that many stewards felt their memorial sites were not sacred. Respondents felt that these public spaces were special or important, but reserved the use of the word sacred for actual religious sites or the September 11 crash sites—which were the final resting grounds of many of the deceased. In particular, family members of September 11 victims

did not believe that these memorials were sacred sites. The wife of the pilot of American Airlines flight 11 that was hijacked on September 11, said: "I don't know if I'd call [the memorials] sacred. They're very special. They are a wonderful tribute to [him]. It's also the big S word. We'd all just rather have [him] back and leave all these wonderful things behind." Reserving the use of the term sacred for traditional religious grounds and consecrated sites demonstrated that strict definitions of sacredness were prevalent.

At many other sites, stewards acknowledged that passage of time would determine whether a site was sacred or not. These stewards felt that sacredness was not bestowed on a site through the act of dedication. Repeated use of a memorial as a space for reflection, relaxation, remembrance, and for peace made a memorial sacred. Longitudinal research is required to ascertain the shifting social meanings and sacredness of these sites.

Finally, this study found a relationship between sacredness and the type of site. Memorials that drew upon natural elements such as lakes, ponds, sea-sides or forested areas, gardens, and fields were considered sacred more often than memorials found in traditional civic settings or on found space. Dynamic changes in the landscape were often said to represent the cycle of birth and death. In some cases, symbolic trees were referenced—such as the planting of two tall trees reminiscent of the Twin Towers of the WTC. These nature-based memorials might lend themselves to stewardship because they offer a broadly understood and visceral representation of the cycles of life. Unlike many of the forested sites discussed in the literature on sacred landscapes, these forested sites were not formally consecrated sacred groves. Rather, they were reappropriated as memorials.

Found space, by its very nature, is often temporary and fleeting. Found space memorials were often more about proactive gestures (e.g., planting a seed, dedicating a tree) rather than creating a space that would last in perpetuity. As significant to those that took part in or witnessed the gesture, the stewards recognized that sacredness would not be universally perceived. Nonetheless, we found stewards of both civic grounds and found spaces who did not hesitate to call their sites sacred.

This study confirmed that connotations of what is sacred are contested and shifting. Living memorials reflected an active tension over social meanings and the appropriate design and use of sacred space. Furthermore, this study identified ways in which physical sites, landscape forms, and symbols of nature contribute to a highly interpretive process of community-based memorialization. The meaning of sacredness can be generated through social practices such as stewardship. Meanings were negotiated through invisible and visible social practices that shaped the form and use of the memorial sites.

Much remains to be understood about the relationships between memorial sites and their stewards. How do organization type, organization size, and number of volunteers correspond to the different uses and forms of memorial sites? What motivates stewards to create or engage with these sites? Neighborhood characteristics and demographics may affect the form and function of community-based memorialization. As such, memorial sites could be investigated as barometers of local public values, attitudes, and beliefs.

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Bios

Erika S. Svendsen is a research social scientist at the U.S. Forest Service Northern Research Station.

Lindsay K. Campbell is a research social scientist at the U.S. Forest Service Northern Research Station.

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Erika S. Svendsen and Lindsay K. Campbell

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