

CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARDS WIND TURBINES IN WALLOON LANDSCAPES

Vincent VANDERHEYDEN, Prof. Dr. Serge SCHMITZ, University of Liège, Department of Geography, Clos Mercator 3, B11, 4000 Liège, Belgium.

vincent.vanderheyden@ulg.ac.be; s.schmitz@ulg.ac.be

Fourth axe: energy issues in rural areas

For many people traditional rural landscapes should be considered as protected sanctuaries. Innovating power generators such as wind turbines may be perceived as intruders. This paper investigates how Belgians, especially Walloons, accept or refuse this recent change in their landscapes.

The exponential growth in wind energy projects in Wallonia started in 1999; it has smoothed since 2011. Opponents are more active, virulent, and organised. They have delayed or stopped many projects and energy policy reforms. Landscape impact is their key argument. But is it a real public concern?

This paper compares public perception of wind turbines in two research projects involving the Laplec research team. The first project (2006-2009) aimed to measure the perceived landscape impact and to explore the social acceptance of wind energy parks in Belgium. We surveyed 1542 residents of Belgium using a photo-questionnaire, which included some photos with wind turbines simulations. We also interviewed 75 stakeholders of five wind energy projects. The second research (2012-2016) aimed to examine deeper the landscape preferences among 54 residents in three areas in Wallonia where wind turbines are present, using the same photographs.

The first research pointed that acceptance of wind energy depended both on landscape types and the nature of project. Attitudes were already changing during the conduct of the project. Familiarity to wind turbines seemed to reduce reluctance. The symbolic aspect of wind energy was highlighted eight years ago. Attractiveness of low quality landscapes increased with the presence of wind turbines.

Today people seem more categorical in their standpoint. Some persons initially favourable feel now to be overwhelmed by them. Others point they can get used to them as long as they are not too many and too close. Public acceptance of wind energy has changed during the last decade in Wallonia. Beyond feelings of saturation, this paper points policy and political changes, lobbying, and loss of confidence in renewable energy efficiency to explain these changing points of view.

Keywords: Wind energy, rural landscapes, public viewpoints, acceptance, Belgium