



ASSESSING LANDSCAPE QUALITY: IS THERE A CONSENSUS AMONG EXPERTS?

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Abstract:

Even if European Landscape Convention proposes a common definition of landscape, defining landscape quality remains an open issue, especially when working in an international and multidisciplinary context. Because of multiple landscape functions, little agreement is found between researchers. This paper describes how we manage to resolve this issue in a bilateral project between Belgium and Romania and lists characteristics that a wide panel of experts from both countries point out to be important.

A survey was conducted among 42 landscape experts in Wallonia (southern Belgium) and Romania. In our study, landscapes experts are professionals who integrate landscapes in their professional practices: nature conservation, tourism, cultural heritage, spatial planning, landscape analysis, and landscape management. They were asked to explain the importance of landscapes in their professional practices and to mark their agreement on 52 Likert-items regarding landscape quality. The items included criteria as various as landscape ecology indicators (stability, connectivity, fragmentation...), ecological and environmental indicators (fauna, flora, alien species, urbanisation, pollution...), interaction with economic development (urbanisation, farming & tourism practices, renewable energy...), landscape character, without forgetting aesthetics and public preferences.

Analysis focused both on consensus and divergences between experts. Consensus has been found on aesthetical value of landscapes, the absence of waste, moderate urbanisation, and sustainable farming practices. Inhabited landscapes may also be quality landscapes according to experts. Divergences are induced both by the geographical context and the professional background. Whereas Romanian landscapes still counts many wild areas, Walloon landscapes have been deeply transformed trough centuries of intensive use.

A hierarchical ascendant classification of the experts confirms the observations. All Romanian experts are grouped together with Walloon experts dealing with nature conservation. A “Walloon school of landscape” appears with experts more sensitive to man-made landscapes

and to a participative approach in landscape research. Spearman's rank correlation coefficients and factorial analysis reveals three ways of assessing landscape quality: a biocentric approach, landscape adaptation to local people's needs, and an aesthetic approach including recreational purposes.

To sum up, the survey highlights nine relevant characteristics of quality landscapes to build a dashboard to assess landscape quality: connectivity, water quality, healthy and local vegetation, absence of human waste, conformity to vernacular architecture, sustainable farming practices, public awareness of landscape quality, and aesthetic value.

References:

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