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Barriers and bridges to sustaining cultural landscapes

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Abstract

This paper looks at factors influencing the maintenance of cultural landscapes in developed countries, especially in the UK. It considers four issues: the driving forces leading to change in cultural landscapes; the role of management plans and land-use plans in reinforcing landscape character; the ‘barriers’ and ‘bridges’ that hinder or facilitate the implementation of these plans; and the use of plans to facilitate a ‘virtuous circle’ so that cultural landscapes are reinforced by sustainable development.

Keywords: landscape character zones; wider countryside; landscape drivers; sense of place

Introduction

This paper is concerned with planning mechanisms to implement land-use changes in a joined-up fashion across the ‘wider countryside’. The emphasis is on UK experience, although it is clear that some countries are already significantly more sophisticated in their use of landscape plans. Broadly, the paper assumes a European context – of long-established cultural landscapes, and a well-founded land use legislature, albeit a liberal one based mainly although not exclusively on private landownership and non-coercive mechanisms. Within this geographical context, the most highly valued landscapes are generally those which fall into IUCN Category V, *Protected landscape/seascape*. These are areas where the interaction of people and nature over time is deemed to have produced a distinctive character with significant aesthetic value and frequently a high level of biological diversity (CNPPA/WCMC 1994). They may conveniently be referred to as ‘cultural landscapes’.

In Western Europe, ‘cultural landscapes’ are those that are characteristically organized at the ‘human scale’, having been ‘built by hand’. Their rate of change has been sufficiently slow to enable local wildlife to establish viable populations, field drainage has been somewhat inefficient, they often convey a sense of enclosure conferring both visual and ecological benefits, their composition is diverse without being fragmented, and local environmental limitations such as steep slopes and shallow soils have restricted the extent of landscape transformation. Both with regard to aesthetics and ecology, these cultural landscapes contribute to a ‘sense of place’ and, historically, have been intimately linked to local society and economy.

In the UK, the approach to protecting these landscapes has generally been one of ‘designation’, that is, drawing lines round areas valued by experts. Typically, areas

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valued for visual aesthetics have been quite extensive but rather weakly protected, whilst areas of nature-conservation importance have tended to be much smaller but supported by stronger legislation. However, the ‘designation’ approach has latterly come under criticism for a number of reasons (Bishop, Phillips and Warren 1997), not least the growing realization that neither ecology nor aesthetics can be safeguarded in the long term on the basis of corralling stand-alone sites. Modern aesthetic and biodiversity objectives rely on a site-in-context approach (MacFarlane 2000) based on a concern for visual coherence and ecological connectivity across the wider countryside. There is growing evidence that governments – national, regional and local – acknowledge the importance of landscape-scale planning, yet the mechanisms to achieve this are haphazard and weak.

Recently, we have started to re-appraise the nature of visual and ecological cohesion in the wider countryside, and to respond with various policy initiatives. The Countryside Agency, for example, has divided England into distinctive Character Zones, typified by variations which “set one area apart from those adjacent to it and make all of them special to the people who live there” (<http://www.countryside.gov.uk/cci/>). This exercise has led to the mapping of England into 159 separate, distinctive tracts, with defining features being individually mapped and recorded. This approach is also being adopted in Scotland, and joint guidance on landscape-character assessment has been issued by the Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage, whilst the Welsh LANDMAP scheme (Countryside Council for Wales 2002) bears many similarities. With respect to ecological character, English Nature has subdivided England into Natural Areas – each with a characteristic association of wildlife and natural features – which represent biogeographic zones based on geology, natural systems and processes, and wildlife (UK Biodiversity Steering Group 1995). Within these zones, policies have been developed in order to reinforce existing, albeit sometimes quite relictual, ecological character.

Whilst the cultural and natural qualities of the *land* are now increasingly well mapped and recognized in policy, it could be argued that ‘*wet landscapes*’ – particularly rivers and the coast – are under-recorded. River landscapes, indeed the whole wetness of the land – have been transformed both in quality and in quantity by land drainage, abstraction and civil-engineering operations. The lateral surface flows and associated features of river basins have progressively disappeared, whilst groundwater and standing water, especially ponds, have been similarly depleted (Boothby 1999; Petts 1996). Equally, there is little collective understanding of cultural seascapes, despite a growing awareness of the problems and associated strategic defence options facing eroding coastlines. There is scope for a fuller understanding of the cultural and natural ecology of seascapes and waterscapes, and for greater integration of their interpretive mapping, planning and management.

Landscape drivers

Of course, the market ‘drivers’ which created this landscape heritage have now largely been superseded, and new environmental conditions are emerging in response to global economic ‘drivers’. The distinguishing features of cultural landscapes were very often the product of fortunate economic accident, albeit some arose from very conscious design and master-planning within large country estates. Whether by accident or design, the ‘wider countryside’ was generally biodiverse. It also

developed an aesthetic based on ‘unified’ places where the parts fitted together well, as distinct from ‘disjointed’, difficult to understand, landscapes (Bell 1999). It is highly improbable that such landscapes will re-emerge in the future by accident: in modern, complex societies, the state will almost invariably need to intervene to compensate for market failure.

The reasons why the market now fails to deliver ‘characteristic’ and ‘distinctive’ landscapes are related to a range of contemporary forces. The principal driver at present is that of globalization – leading to a liberalization of trade and the abolition of local arrangements, an international style in cultural artefacts, and an extravagant use of ‘food miles’ to cater for taste rather than sustenance. Of course, globalization is not all bad and it may contribute to a universal awareness of the fragility of our planet as well as greater international co-operation, but in general it creates market conditions which are insensitive to localized practices and traditions. Another driver is the severance of links, both economic and psychological, between people and place. No longer are most countryside residents reliant on the land, or even necessarily familiar with the rural economy. The rise of the ‘new service classes’, with their rural homes and urban attitudes, creates conditions where it is more difficult to rely on community maintenance of cherished landscapes. The third main driver is that of productivism, not only in agriculture, but also in areas such as forestry and water supply. Whilst some of the current academic literature suggests a shift towards post-productivism, this often refers to policy inflexions and relatively embryonic local food networks rather than the mainstream practices of resource managers. All this leads to an ‘international’ culture reflected in the increasing uniformity of our landscapes and in the fragmentation of their green infrastructure.

Most people appear to want a countryside which has a coherent sense of place and which is distinctive and diverse. Even if we are fully signed-up members of the global village, our human spirit seems simultaneously to crave a local identity (Castells 1997). Moreover, it is not just lay communities that wish this: scientific and policy communities have their own reasons to re-kindle characteristic, coherent and connected landscapes. If the need for distinctiveness and naturalness is so universally accepted, why are we not routinely producing landscapes of ecological and aesthetic integrity? The answer is, clearly, the failure of market mechanisms to deliver them. Where market failure occurs, there is generally a need to introduce planning; and, whilst planning never succeeds in reversing powerful socio-economic drivers, it can harness and deflect them in order to make their outcomes more sustainable. The term ‘planning’ here refers not only to statutory development plans, but also to non-statutory indicative frameworks and strategies which rely more on incentives and facilitation than control. The challenge lies in re-instating a ‘virtuous’ circle of positive reinforcement between community and landscape to counteract the vicious circle of globalizing uniformity.

In broad terms, the contribution of society and economy to the landscape and the contribution which the landscape can make to sustainable development may be interpreted as one of mutual reinforcement. Thus, plans should seek to support a ‘virtuous circle’ in which the socio-economy contributes to ecology and beauty, and the environment underpins community and prosperity (Powell, Selman and Wragg 2002). For example, the contribution of society and economy to the landscape is illustrated by:

- continuing economic activities and social customs which maintain a distinctive landscape;

- constructing, maintaining and converting buildings in such a way that they provide benefits to local character;
- creating new features in the landscape, such as forests and recreation facilities, which complement the characteristic scenery and ecology; and
- providing policy support to activities underpinning local distinctiveness.

In a complementary fashion, the landscape can support sustainable development by processes such as:

- supplying wholesome water, biodiversity and productive soil to underpin basic human needs and economic activities;
- affording opportunities for recreation, tranquillity and personal renewal, both for traditional countryside visitors and sections of the community who may hitherto have felt unwelcome in the countryside;
- offering opportunities for the livelihood of a viable resident population base;
- extending the economic benefits of protected-area status beyond the protected area itself e.g. surrounding market towns.

This relationship is summarized in Figure 1.

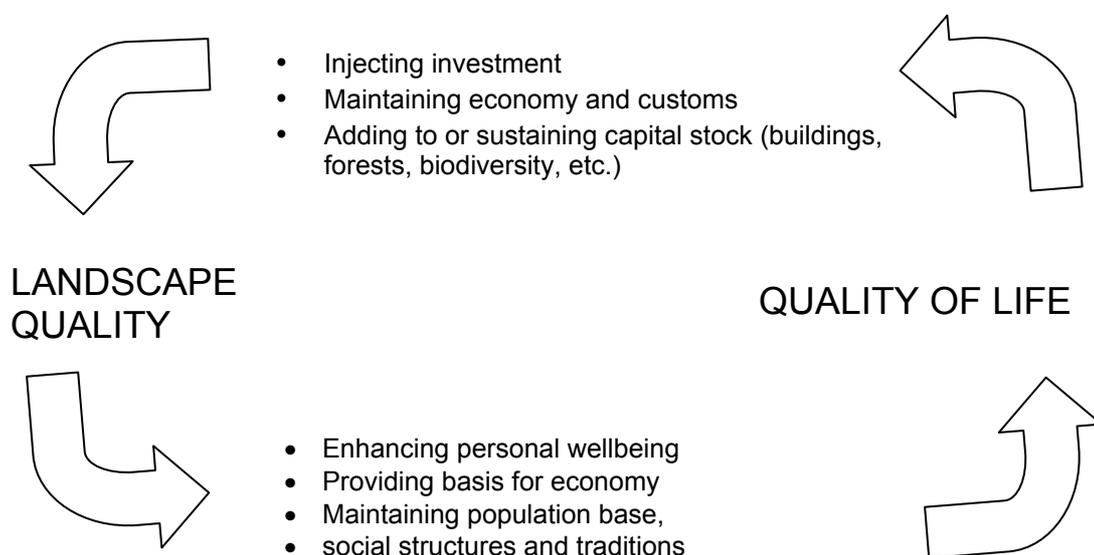


Figure 1. The virtuous circle between land and people in cultural landscapes (Powell, Selman and Wragg 2002)

Barriers and bridges in landscape planning

The use of plans to reinstate cultural landscapes will depend on their ability to help overcome the ‘barriers’ that frustrate effective conservation action. According to Trudgill (1990), six principal barriers are responsible for the environmental-policy implementation gap. Along with brief summaries of their meaning, these are:

- *agreement* – lack of consensus over the most effective course of action
- *knowledge* – insufficient models or datasets on which to base decisions
- *technology* – limited technical expertise to mitigate or reverse environmental impacts

- *economic* – ‘sustainable’ options are often financially unattractive, perhaps because the real worth of resources is undervalued
- *social* – communities lack the will or capacity to manage the environment sustainably
- *political* – short-termism leads to quick-fix, electorally expedient decisions.

These barriers have been examined in relation to the implementation of biodiversity plans, and the results provide an important insight into the forces threatening cultural landscapes (Watts 2001; Watts and Selman 2004). For example, in the Culm Grasslands of Devon (England), where measures are in place to reverse the loss of semi-natural pasture, the barriers were identified as:

- *agreement* – poor communication and co-ordination, uncertainty over scheme objectives, unclear responsibility for surveying certain areas
- *knowledge* – marginal sites unknown, advisors’ lack of familiarity with key farming issues, gaps in habitat-management knowledge
- *technology* – lack of established habitat-restoration techniques, non-availability of appropriate grazing livestock
- *economic* – insufficient availability/targeting of Countryside Stewardship, the main agro-environmental grant in the area
- *social* – negative owner attitudes towards advisors and ‘amenity farming’, ownership changes, limited public appreciation/awareness
- *political* – state of agricultural economy, BSE-related rules on livestock sales.

However, these were to some extent offset by ‘bridges’ to a better environment, including:

- *agreement* – partnerships, specific actions e.g. site recovery
- *knowledge* – improved inventory of semi-natural grassland sites
- *technology* – indicative planning, habitat-restoration techniques
- *economic* – availability and application of Countryside Stewardship, NGO purchase of Culm sites, opportunities to add value to local farm produce by ‘place marketing’
- *social* – advisor field visits, publications, farm events
- *political* – flax growers’ protocol.

Plans for the wider countryside

In relation to biodiversity planning, it is apparent that current ‘drivers’ can to some extent be deflected through an imaginative combination of controls, inducements, education, information, practical action and advice. Attempts to plan the ‘wider countryside’ must seek to marshal the appropriate combination of instruments in order to overcome implementation barriers. In broad terms, the kinds of implementation resources available to landscape plans comprise:

- a ‘knowledge’ base in which issues, barriers and opportunities can be ‘framed’, learning can take place, and professional and lay knowledge can be merged through the use of deliberative techniques;
- a ‘relational’ base, defined through stakeholder analysis, that utilizes the power and relationships between different stakeholders as a means of integrating collective aspirations for landscape management; and
- a ‘mobilization capacity’, drawing upon a repertoire of implementation techniques and change agents (based on Healey et al. 2002).

The repertoire of implementation techniques is summarized in Table 1. Even statutory land-use plans are subject to common failures – such as slowness of production, insufficient powers, weak enforcement, planners’ limited scientific knowledge, and paucity of relevant ‘good practice’ examples – and non-statutory rural land use plans that are lacking planning powers over agriculture and forestry are even more prone to implementation failure. However, a recent raft of ‘wider countryside’ plans has been introduced, somewhat haphazardly, in parts of the UK, and therein lie some interesting possibilities for influencing the use of rural land and water resources. Of particular interest in the current context is the extent to which these plans can be deployed to reinforce the aesthetic coherence and ecological connectedness of the countryside. Elsewhere, I have suggested that much of their content could profitably be synthesized into ‘multi-function landscape plans’ (Selman 2002), closely linked to statutory development plans, whilst the recent report of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (2002) has similarly proposed ‘Integrated Spatial Strategies’. The mobilization capacities of some of these plans are briefly reviewed below.

The scope for state-led intervention to co-ordinate stakeholder action at the local level is demonstrated by the emergence of ‘wider countryside’ plans in the UK. For example, planners have sought to influence woodland management through forestry and woodland strategies (Selman 1997), and a number of community forests are being implemented as major new landscape features (Countryside Commission 1994). The Forestry Commission now advocates woodland as a strategic means of achieving environmental quality, recreation provision and rural diversification (Forestry Commission 1998; 2000) and, at a more local scale, it produces ‘forest design plans’ for individual major plantations; the zonal plans and more selective ‘heartwood framework’ plans prepared for England’s Community Forests (Countryside Commission 1994) have similar purposes. Nature conservation has also been addressed at local government level by a number of county ‘nature conservation strategies’ (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds 1993), but these are now being superseded by local Biodiversity Action Plans (BAPs), which focus attention on a prioritized list of vulnerable species and habitats. An even more explicit spatial approach to biodiversity planning is represented by English Nature’s *Lifescapes* initiative, which currently involves the mapping of future potential land use and provides a tool for developing visions for future habitat restoration and targeted creation of new wildlife habitats. Whilst there are no formal plans for farmed landscapes in the UK, latterly, whole farm plans have been produced as a means of channelling environmental grant aid. More speculatively, MacFarlane (1998) and Dolman et al. (2001) have researched the possibility for farmers to pursue conservation benefit on a neighbourhood basis, so that landscape-ecological objectives might be met over a contiguous area. With regard to amenity conservation, various approaches have been taken to planning both commonplace and exceptional landscapes. The longest-standing commitment to landscape-scale planning in the UK has been through the family of national parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) (Holdaway and Smart 2001). The management plans produced for most AONBs have recently been reinforced by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (Countryside Agency 2001), and they are typically co-ordinated on a collaborative basis and involve the building of consensus between stakeholders.

Table 1. Implementation mechanisms available to 'wider countryside' plans

Statutory planning controls – non-statutory documents can be linked to development plans and development controls, e.g. construction work within river floodplains, landscaping proposals associated with house building, opportunities for restoring derelict land, landscape corridors within urban areas
Conservation powers – e.g. designation of individual sites as Sites of Special Scientific Interest
Financial support to land managers – e.g. management grants and funded management agreements
Provision of information, research and monitoring – suboptimal land use often occurs through ignorance rather than intention
Direct management – area-based landscape-improvement projects may be allocated modest funds for practical local tasks aimed at landscape enhancement and community involvement; the behaviour of private land managers and public agencies may be influenced through the negotiation of voluntary codes of practice
Partnerships and forums – mechanisms for building trust between countryside stakeholders

The importance of the water catchment as a cohesive natural unit around which environment-led plans can be produced has long been acknowledged. In the UK, the reasons leading, first, to the production of Catchment Management Plans and, subsequently, to Local Environment Agency Plans (LEAPs) included pressures to replace traditional civil-engineering solutions to flood management with more naturalistic designs wherever possible, and the growing recognition of connections between river processes and (seemingly inexorable) floodplain development. Issues of water quality and quantity, statutory duties and consultation requirements, nature-conservation responsibilities, and the effects of intensive agriculture were also important drivers (Environment Agency 1998; DETR 2001). LEAPs, in turn, are now being replaced by River Basin Management Plans, in the wake of the Water Framework Directive. The coastline is of particular interest as a dynamic environment of great physical and ecological significance, and is the site of intense competition between user groups. More recently, attention has turned to the prospect of sea-level change, and some strategic responses to this situation, such as 'managed retreat', contain an important landscape-ecological dimension. Traditionally, integrated coastal-zone management has scarcely existed in the UK, and the sheer complexity of legal provisions and ownerships relevant to the land on either side of the tidal limit, together with the number of government departments and agencies representing the multiple interests along the coastline, has militated against co-ordinated action. However, English Nature (1992) has facilitated the production of a series of Estuary Management Plans, and Shoreline Management Plans (SMPs) have been prepared in relation to 'coastal cells' dividing the coastline into a number of relatively self-contained units of sediment movement (Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 1995; 2000).

Reinforcing the 'Virtuous Circle' in cultural landscapes

Our core dilemma is that traditional cultural landscapes in post-industrial societies are, normally, no longer self-sustaining, and the links between landscape, community

and economy no longer self-reinforcing. Consequently, state intervention is usually necessary to encourage land managers to pursue practices which enhance rather than erode visual and ecological distinctiveness. Effective strategies require the synthesis of a knowledge base, a relational base and a mobilization capacity. With regard to conventional nature-conservation practice, it has been relatively straightforward to assemble expert scientific knowledge, management structures, and a combination of legislation and direct funding to protect nature reserves. However, it is increasingly clear that site-based approaches by themselves do not achieve landscape-ecological objectives.

The maintenance of cultural landscapes in a European context requires approaches which retain traditional knowledge and complex network relations between land users and the wider socio-economy. This paper has proposed ‘wider countryside’ non-statutory plans as one element in reinforcing these relationships. By themselves, they are often ineffectual, but their potential lies in helping to build consensus between and co-ordinate the programmes of key agencies. They can assist in drawing together a range of knowledge – theories, contemporary wisdom, inherited practices and stories – held by scientists, practitioners and the lay community. In terms of the relational base, they can help ‘thicken’ institutional social capital by identifying key stakeholders and agencies, cultivating the formal and informal networks between them, and increasing the frequency and effectiveness of intercommunication. They can also help to blend the available grants, legal powers, advisory services, guidance and information sources available to the various stakeholders.

‘Wider countryside’ plans are only one means of helping to reinforce the virtuous circle between landscape and people. However, they are of particular interest because they provide a ready mechanism for the inclusion of spatially extensive measures to address the gamut of environmental, social and economic issues in cultural landscapes. Currently, there are a number of encouraging possibilities which suggest that planning instruments can have a positive effect on the virtuous circle. These include trends towards:

- ‘safe’ food production – which requires a degree of embeddedness of production and consumption in local markets, to improve traceability and distinctive produce;
- the ‘production’ of landscape – there appears to be a public willingness to support farmers to produce beautiful countryside, recognizing its spin-offs for quality of life and sustainable tourism;
- public-benefit forestry – there is a shift not only towards multiple-use forestry, but also towards socially inclusive forestry which seeks to restore derelict land, improve quality of life, achieve environmental gains, and provide all people with opportunities for healthy exercise;
- integrated water planning – the combination of severe flooding combined with summer water shortages is leading water companies to consider the effects of overall land-use changes within the river basin, and to ‘tame the flood’ by more naturalistic water-management technologies and sustainable urban drainage systems.

There are doubtless many other examples of specific opportunities which can be facilitated by wider countryside plans, but these illustrate the kinds of ‘bridges’ that are currently available.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested that the various ‘fortunate accidents’ that produced valued landscapes are being supplanted by drivers which are leading to incoherent or uniform landscapes. Attempts to re-couple socio-economic activity and landscape maintenance encounter a number of barriers. However, imaginative and integrated use of ‘wider countryside’ plans and their associated powers may help to provide ‘bridges’ to new cultural landscapes by deflecting the drivers in a more ‘virtuous’ direction. Whilst the key driver is that of globalization, nonetheless, people appear to crave a counterweight of localization, and this provides opportunities to facilitate virtuous circles between people and place. Plans cannot work against deep-seated economic and social forces, but they can help reinforce those drivers which produce a ‘localizing’ effect and help mitigate the unintended adverse consequences of non-local pressures. In other words, wider countryside plans can help to overcome barriers and build bridges to the ‘virtuous circle’ of cultural-landscape development.

This paper has argued that the ‘fortunate accidents’ which led to visually coherent and biodiverse landscape are unlikely to recur; yet more integrated planning across the wider countryside can help re-couple drivers to local places. We cannot buck the trends of globalization nor retain the precise appearance and practices of traditional landscapes. Yet, by recognizing and assisting the virtuous circle, the key ecological and aesthetic values of cultural landscapes may yet be sustained.

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