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## Changing conceptualization of landscape in English landscape assessment methods

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### Abstract

Landscape Character Assessment is a method that has gained prominence in England within the last 10 years. It has developed from earlier methods of landscape evaluation and Landscape Assessment. This chapter analyses the changing conceptualization of landscape between those methods, all, in some way or another, related to the government agency concerned with the countryside in England, the Countryside Commission/Agency. It illustrates how the methods, although following wider conservation debates, have strong links with the changing institutional remit of the Countryside Commission/Agency and it shows how the recent focus on landscape as being about ‘people and place’ brings socio-economic aspects into the heart of landscape assessment. The current landscape assessment method Landscape Character

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Assessment is broad in its application, which allows disparate issues to be brought together within a landscape framework. This framework has also been adopted by other government institutions such as English Nature and English Heritage, which both advocate an approach similar to the Countryside Agency emphasizing the role of landscape within a sustainable-development context. However, as this chapter also illustrates, although the landscape framework adopted is similar, each agency deals with it slightly differently reflecting the different remits of the agencies.

**Keywords:** Landscape Character Assessment; Countryside Agency; landscape management

### Introduction

Landscape protection and conservation has gained little prominence in international policy-making until recently. This, however, has changed with the introduction of the World Heritage Convention (adopted in 1972, amended in 1992 to allow increased recognition of cultural landscapes) and the European Landscapes Convention (2000) resulting in the “harnessing of landscape as an international policy instrument” (Phillips and Clarke 2004, p. 49). This new emphasis can be attributed to two (interrelated) developments (Phillips and Clarke 2004), the ways in which landscape has come to be seen as a resource in its own right and as a means to achieve sustainable development (Selman 2000). The recognition of the intrinsic value of landscape has a long history in Britain and has been institutionalized since the 1950s through the designation of National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Sites of Special Scientific Interest. The development of a landscape understanding as a means to achieve sustainable development is of more recent concern, linked to the Brundtland report on sustainable development, published in 1987, and national debates on sustainability following the United Nations’ conference on environment and development held in Rio in 1992 (‘Agenda 21’).

However, although landscape has been recognized in its own right for a long time in the UK, the concept of landscape has changed. This chapter attempts to analyse this change in relation to some of the key methods for landscape assessment that have been used in England since the late 1960s. The methods illustrate a marked change in the conception of landscape, from landscape being regarded mainly as a visual concept to landscape being about ‘people and place’ (Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage 2002). Most of the methods have also been applied in a broader UK context, and in a similar way most conservation debates are relevant to the UK in general. The focus on England has been chosen because, although several of the government agencies discussed in this chapter previously have covered more than one of the nations in Britain (England, Scotland and Wales), the current coverage of the agencies discussed here is limited to England only.

The field of landscape assessment was developed using a range of methods, none of which was more prominent than others. The field has now developed a single dominant method of assessment, Landscape Character Assessment (LCA), which now underlies most area-based policies such as structure plans, agro-environmental schemes, conservation and planning for landscape change. This is due to its ability to embrace the second development: sustainable development.

This chapter analyses these changes and their implications in two parts. The first part illustrates how the concept of landscape has changed through time through an analysis of the landscape definitions within three different landscape assessment

methods: landscape evaluation (applied mainly in the 1970s), Landscape Assessment (applied in the 1980s) and LCA (applied from 1990 onwards). It should be noted that this article uses landscape assessment (small letters) as an overarching term to describe methods for assessing/evaluating landscape in contrast to Landscape Assessment (capital letters) which denotes a specific method. The analysis will be related to changes in conservation debates in general and the changing remits of the Countryside Commission/Agency more specifically (the differences of which will be discussed later). Three key pieces of literature will be used. The first is a report from a landscape evaluation research project commissioned by the Countryside Commission (Robinson et al. 1976), the others are guidelines on Landscape Assessment (Countryside Commission 1993) and LCA (Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage 2002). The second part illustrates how a change has occurred from landscape assessment being considered a tool for landscape management to landscape assessment now being considered a tool that enables management through a landscape context (Fish, Haines-Young and Rubiano 2003). It, moreover, looks at how the concept of landscape found in the LCA guidelines relates to parallel developments in wildlife (English Nature) and heritage conservation (English Heritage), which both are increasingly working within a broader perspective to conservation than site-specific protection. This is often referred to as working on a landscape scale, although it still remains unclear what a landscape scale actually covers.

## **The concept of landscape in landscape evaluation**

Conservation in England has a long tradition of distinguishing between ‘landscape’ and ‘wildlife’ conservation. This distinction was reinforced by the creation of two separate agencies through the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. This Act split the responsibilities of protecting designated areas in two: areas protected for their visual amenities went to one agency and those protected for their ecological and geological value went to another (Adams 2003). Although agency names have changed over the 55-year period, the distinction is still upheld and has until recently been important in differentiating landscape assessment methods from other environmental-assessment methods.

The ‘landscape agency’ set up in 1949 was the National Parks Commission with the responsibility of preserving and enhancing protected (landscape) areas in England and Wales. Thus, high (scenic/visual) -quality countryside was the main focus of the National Parks Commission. The Countryside Act 1968 created the Countryside Commission in its place. Though its previous responsibilities were upheld, its remit broadened to include the conservation and enjoyment of and access to the wider countryside (Adams 2003). The debate leading to the 1968 Act focused on how to contain recreation pressure in national parks, and the remits were thus broadened not because of general concern for the wider countryside but to take pressure off designated areas (Adams 2003). The new Countryside Commission wanted to improve landscape assessment and it therefore commissioned a report on the methods of landscape evaluation developed so far.

Landscape evaluation is a term that covers a wide variety of methods with the aim of *evaluating* landscape in order to determine the quality or value of landscapes, i.e., what makes one landscape *better* than the other. The report, commissioned by the Countryside Commission, reviewed the state of the art within landscape evaluation (Robinson et al. 1976). It was the first Countryside Commission report on landscape

assessment methods and it revealed a diverse set of approaches with no dominant approach in England. The report adopted a broad landscape definition to encompass all the methods it reviewed, illustrating that landscape can be understood in a wide variety of ways from the total regional environment to just the countryside alone, the latter being the most commonly held understanding within landscape evaluation. Moreover, the report stated that:

“The project’s review of existing landscape evaluation techniques confirmed that many studies regarded landscape simply as the scenic resource of the countryside – assessing only on the basis of overall visual appearance” (Robinson et al. 1976, p. 16).

Thus, the 1976 report implies that the landscape evaluation methods reviewed strongly reflected the landscape/nature divide in British conservation. This restricted focus was questioned in the report, which suggested that more attention should be paid to a wider range of resources based on ecological principles such as land capability, land-use needs, climate, hydrological regimes, habitat diversity, vegetation etc., *as well as visual qualities* (Robinson et al. 1976, p. 247). This was a much broader understanding of landscape than the one that dominated landscape conservation at the time, and understanding that implied that landscape was not confined to scenery alone, in order to manage landscape more factors needed to be taken into account.

The way in which landscape evaluation methods ranked the countryside in terms of either quality or value was in line with the prevailing practice since the National Parks act, which had encouraged conservation and protection of specific areas. The report supported the evaluation of landscape and stated that planning authorities needed more information on the *value* of landscape in order to plan development and conservation policies (Robinson et al. 1976). Thus, the report still called for the protection of high-quality areas, although quality, it argued, should be applied to the wider countryside and not only to designated areas.

More importantly, the 1976 report supported the statistical/mathematical methods used in landscape evaluation to assess scenic beauty. These methods typically divided landscape into grid squares and used a numerical evaluation system in which certain landscape features such as woodland cover, land use, elevation etc. were given scores. The areas with the highest scores were then considered the landscapes of highest value.

The Countryside Commission’s response to the 1976 report was expressed at the North Pennine AONB public inquiry (October 1985), where the Commission stated that the approach advocated in the report “had not been found valuable and that the sort of factors to be considered in assessing beauty could not be reduced to a computer print-out alone” (Quoted in Landscape Research Group 1988, paragraph 3.11). However, although the inspector’s report agreed with the Countryside Commission’s view he also found that in relation to the inquiry the Countryside Commission had not carried out “any proper objective analysis of the quality of the landscape, but had relied on subjective judgement” (Countryside Commission 1987, paragraph 2.7). Knowing that this would be a continuing criticism of landscape designation proposals, the Countryside Commission started a search for another approach: an approach less technical and mathematical in its analysis of landscape qualities and one that paid more attention to the more perceptual side of landscape (Swanwick 2004). The North Pennine AONB public enquiry thus marked a change in

the state of the art, a change that gave room for new methods of assessing the landscape: Landscape Assessment. Although the Countryside Commission had not been directly involved in the development of landscape evaluation methods, it played an important institutional role in assessing prevalent methods and critiquing the statistical approach to landscape evaluation.

## The concept of landscape in Landscape Assessment

During the late 1970s concern began to rise about the destruction of landscape wrought by agricultural change. The 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act was the first partial acknowledgment of this concern, although this acknowledgment was more profound in the debate surrounding the Act than in the Act itself (Adams 2003). This increased concern for the wider countryside was also prevalent in the Countryside Commission and in relation to landscape assessment it meant that previous methods had a deficit. If all countryside mattered, the question was no longer about *evaluating* whether an area was better than another but to determine what made one landscape *different* from another. This gave rise to the Landscape Assessment method characterized by a division of the assessment part from the evaluation part (Swanwick 2004). This method was developed through studies such as the Mid Wales uplands (Land Use Consultants 1986) and the Warwickshire Landscapes Project (Countryside Commission 1991) and through further review of literature relating to both practice and research in landscape assessment (e.g. Landscape Research Group 1988). The Countryside Commission took an active part in all of these method developments and through that became an increasingly prominent actor in the field.

Although the landscape evaluation report (Robinson et al. 1976) indicated a move towards a broader understanding of landscape, the first sentences in the Landscape Assessment guidance still emphasized the visual aspects of landscape:

“The term **landscape** refers primarily to the visual appearance of the land, including its shape, form and colour. It also reflects the way in which these various components combine to create specific patterns and pictures that are distinctive to particular localities” (Countryside Commission 1993, p. 4, original emphasis).

However, it did take wider dimensions into account in determining landscape, dimensions such as geology, topography, soils, ecology, archaeology, landscape history, land use, architecture and cultural associations. Where the landscape evaluation report suggested an ecological basis to landscape, Landscape Assessment brought in an increasingly multiple understanding:

“Landscape is of fundamental importance in many ways. It is an essential part of our natural resource base. It contains valued evidence of earlier periods of human habitation, and provides an environment for plant and animal communities. As human habitat it holds a special meaning for many people as the source of numerous experiences and memories. Many of these are visual, but at times the landscape may also evoke other sensual, cultural and even spiritual responses” (Countryside Commission 1993, p. 4).

By viewing landscape as a natural-resource base landscape was still seen as a physical resource, but it had gained meanings related to history, nature and memories in addition to scenery. This change partly reflected general changes in the conservation debate but also reflected the institutional remit of the Countryside Commission. The Countryside Commission would probably not have been able to work with the ecologically focused method suggested in the 1976 report due to the nature of its statutory responsibilities. The responsibility for nature and wildlife belonged principally to the Nature Conservancy Council (now English Nature). This new definition gave the Commission a possibility for championing the human side of the landscape in line with its remit. Moreover, the Countryside Commission did not hold land nor did it have legal powers, which meant that in order to gain influence it had to work in partnership with other countryside actors (Phillips 1993). These actors included both conservationists and landowners. An approach with a wider landscape understanding made it easier to get those actors involved.

### **The concept of landscape in Landscape Character Assessment**

However, during the early 1990s institutional change took place in Britain. The institutionalization of the landscape/nature divide was closed in Scotland and Wales, at least on paper, through the merger of the agencies responsible for landscape and nature. In England both agencies responsible for landscape and nature conservation (the Countryside Commission and English Nature) were reduced to national agencies only. The merger of the Scottish and Welsh agencies respectively, put the two agencies under pressure to join (part of their) forces. In 1993/94 the Countryside Commission produced a pilot scheme, conducted in the Southwest, called New Map of England. The aim was to create a map that described the landscape character of England (Brooke 1994). At the same time English Nature launched its Natural Areas Programme in order to provide a similar national framework for setting nature-conservation objectives. A 1994 government organizational review opted against the merger of the two agencies but strongly encouraged the agencies to work more closely together. The two maps were an obvious example where the agencies could join their forces and produce a single joint map (Swanwick 2004). The project was launched as the Countryside Character (Area) initiative, through which English Nature and the Countryside Agency in 1996 produced a map covering England, with additional support from English Heritage. The resultant Character Areas depicted on the map combined Countryside Character areas with Natural Areas as single units (mainly). Although the three agencies thereafter worked fairly independently in developing their own methods for their own institutional uses, this joint work had set the framework and outlined the methodology for all 'character'-based work in England. Thus, although the divide between landscape and nature conservation was upheld for the time being, the 'character of England' map was an example of increased similarity between the approaches and interests of the agencies. This similarity was also noted in other parts of the agencies' work such as the then recently introduced Environmentally Sensitive Areas schemes (Adams 1993).

In 2002 the Countryside Agency, as the Commission became in 1999, produced the latest guidance on LCA. By this time more than eighty percent of counties had already produced landscape assessments using Countryside Commission/Agency methods (Swanwick 2004), thereby confirming the Countryside Agency as the key

institution responsible for producing landscape assessment guidance. In this new guidance once again the definition of landscape had changed:

“Landscape is about the relationship between people and place. It provides the setting for our day-to-day lives. The term does not mean just special or designated landscapes and it does not only apply to the countryside [...] It results from the way that different components of our environment – both natural (the influences of geology, soils, climate, flora and fauna) and cultural (the historical and current impact of land use, settlement, enclosure and other human interventions) – interact together and are perceived by us [...] People’s perceptions turn land into the concept of landscape. This is not just about visual perception, or how we see the land, but also how we hear, smell and feel our surroundings, and the feelings, memories or associations that they evoke. Landscape character, which is the pattern that arises from particular combinations of the different components, can provide a sense of place to our surroundings” (Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage 2002, p. 2-3).

Landscape Assessment’s methodological characteristic of dividing the assessment part from the evaluation part remained; namely, distinguishing between characterization processes and making judgments. The difference between LCA and earlier methods however, lies in the first line of the definition. Viewing landscape as a *relationship* is very different from viewing landscape as the visual appearance of land. In Landscape Assessment, landscape seemed to be considered as one resource amongst many; in LCA, landscape is the relational foundation on which all the other resources are compiled. The specific interaction between those resources and the way in which we perceive them in a place is what makes a landscape unique.

The change from the Countryside Commission to the Countryside Agency in 1999 involved a merger between the Countryside Commission and parts of the Rural Development Commission, the latter with the remit of providing national advisory work on rural issues for government and others (Rogers 1999). Thus, the Countryside Agency now also had responsibility to address rural social and economic issues. The changing definition of landscape in the guidance can be interpreted in the light of this change. By re-conceptualizing landscape to be about people and place, LCA can be seen as a means through which social and economic issues of the countryside can be addressed.

Another change in the landscape definition is found in the LCA guidance: landscape is regarded as formed through perception. In other words, as it is no longer possible to view landscape as something objectively ‘out there’, different individuals might have different perceptions of it. In theory this means that expert-led approaches to landscape assessment are no longer viable as local people might view their landscape very differently from landscape specialists. Thus there is an increased emphasis in the guidance for landscapes to be assessed through (or in practise with the aid of) local knowledge through the use of stakeholder involvement. Community involvement in local decision-making is a high priority in central government, especially those related to their sustainable-development policy statements. Hence, with the remit of addressing social, economic, environmental as well as landscape aspects of the countryside and with a tool that can overarch these areas and that (at

least in theory) has community involvement as an integral part of it, the Countryside Agency is in a powerful position to embrace the sustainable-development agenda in relation to countryside planning. This is made explicit in the guidance, which states that LCA is “one of a growing number of tools which can be used in planning for sustainable development” (Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage 2002, p. 2). In practise, LCAs vary, and the level of stakeholder involvement depends partly on the willingness of local authority to engage stakeholders and partly on budget which often does not allow for major community engagement projects, which leaves stakeholder involvement to include spokespersons from the major interest groups only.

### **Landscape as basis for management?**

Because the LCA guidance sees landscape as multidimensional by definition, as a relationship rather than a resource, this opens the way for landscape assessment to provide an integrative analysis approach. Therefore the Countryside Agency sees LCA as also a tool that can be applied to a variety of spatial problems. A list of uses where LCA can inform include: stakeholder/community involvement, planning policy, planning strategy, landscape monitoring and designations, economic strategy, tourism strategy, Environmental Impact Assessments, biodiversity action plans, townscapes etc. Besides the wide applicability of the approach, this list also illustrates how the changing remit of the Countryside Agency has influenced what could be perceived as a landscape issue. Until the Countryside Agency introduced LCA, landscape assessment had mainly been about landscape management. However, several of the areas listed above are more related to socio-economic issues such as tourism, community, townscapes and economy, rather than what is normally considered as landscape management. Fish et al. (2003) suggested that an emerging feature of policy agendas for sustainability is a “marrying together [of] seemingly disparate concerns at landscape level...” (p. 148). LCA is, in the guidance, seen as a suitable tool to bring these concerns together in order to achieve sustainability goals, and with the broad range of applications it already has, it seems as if this role is acknowledged, if not on a policy level, at least on the application level. Thus, with both policy and landscape assessment indicating a move towards the socio-economic and environmental concern at a landscape level, what seems to be emerging is a new way of management: management through landscape.

This way of using the landscape character concept as a basis for management is not unique to the Countryside Agency although it was the first to develop the approach. As noted earlier, the Countryside Character initiative outlined the methodology for all character-based work in England. This is seen in initiatives and methods such as English Nature’s Natural Areas and their Lifescapes project, both based on a characterization approach (Porter 2004), and in Historic Landscape Characterization method developed by English Heritage (Fairclough 2003).

The development of the Natural Area approach can be seen as a result of a decline in the distribution of protected species within the existing nature conservation areas (Porter 2004; Tilzey 2000) and as part of a broader change in attitude towards nature conservation in general (Tilzey 2000). Similarly, the recent English Nature’s Lifescapes approach aims to bringing together the parallel work of the Countryside Agency, English Heritage and itself in order to “create a more integrated view of landscape” (Porter 2004). This approach was developed as it was found that



“biodiversity targets in the countryside cannot be achieved through a narrow focus on species, habitats and natural features” (Porter 2004) as several other cultural and economic landscape factors are important. Thus, in a discussion on how biodiversity targets can be met through the Lifescapes approach English Nature links social and economic benefits with landscape restoration within a sustainability context in a similar way to the Countryside Agency:

“Delivery needs to recognize and respect other users of landscape, and ensure that social and economic benefits are achieved through restoration of a more sustainable landscape. The concept of heritage is central to thinking about Lifescapes. This includes the visual, cultural and historic elements, as well as biodiversity, which collectively encompass what the public sees as landscape.” (Porter 2004, p. 104)

The links between LCA and Historic Landscape Characterization are even stronger. The Historic Landscape Characterization method was adapted from LCA, and several studies have been conducted where a Historic Landscape Characterization underlies an LCA (Countryside Agency, Scottish Natural Heritage and English Heritage 2002). The method developed partly as a result of a shift in scope that went from protecting the past at special places only, to “managing change across the whole historic environment in broader, more socially embedded, ways that relate to all places, in all aspects” (Fairclough 2003, p. 299). This broadening out is similar to those ones experienced by the Countryside Agency and English Nature, which the new methods addressed. The other reason why English Heritage developed its method was in a response to LCA, which English Heritage still found too visual and scenic in its criteria and which had “limited recognition of the human processes by which the environment has been modified” over time (Fairclough 2003, p. 296) especially when considering time-depth.

However, besides their difference in focus, all three methods reflect the changing attitude towards nature conservation and environmental/landscape management. Historic Landscape Characterization mirrors the two other method descriptions by arguing that conservation policy has treated natural and cultural features separately for too long (Macinnes 2004). Moreover, similar to the two other approaches Historic Landscape Characterization has not only conservation in mind, the list for possible applications of Historic Landscape Characterization mirrors the LCA list.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has illustrated how the concept of landscape within methods for landscape assessment has changed in UK over time. Both the development of the remit of the Countryside Commission/Agency and of broader concerns regarding conservation and sustainable development has led landscape to be much more about ‘people and place’ rather than being considered a visual amenity. It has also been demonstrated how the issues dealt with and methodologies used by two other government agencies with countryside interests related to wildlife (English Nature) and heritage (English Heritage) respectively, are similar to those of the Countryside Agency. However, these agencies deal with them in a slightly different manner. This fact is important because, while they on a general level seemingly are advocating the same concerns, the institutional remits of the agencies still influence the particular

approach taken and the emphasis given to particular issues. And thus, one approach does not substitute another. However, from an English perspective, these boundaries are increasingly beginning to disappear. The recent rural-agencies review, the Haskins report (Haskins 2003), suggested a merging of English Nature and the Countryside Agency. Such a merger will bring the longstanding landscape/nature divide to an end and thus hopefully bring new perspectives to the understanding and managing of landscapes. Moreover, LCA and the related methods have gone beyond being 'about' conservation. It seems to have created a whole new framework through which we can tackle rural (and urban) problems on an integrative landscape level.

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