



# A ‘deep’ aesthetics of contested landscapes: Visions of land use as competing temporalities

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Landscape aesthetics  
Mining  
Multiple use  
Epistemology  
Power  
Time

## ABSTRACT

Multiple use forests in the United States take on different meanings for people who live, work, and recreate on the land. Forests are imbued with often contested visions of what the landscape is and ought to be, and this is related to the various knowledges, values, and experiences of users who project social, political, and economic power. The resources and amenities of multiple use public lands in the American West are typically managed as common property for sustained-yield and equal access. The major exception to this being the priority given to hardrock mining, which is legally designated as the “highest and best use”. This article looks at a proposed rare earth mine in the Black Hills of Wyoming to assess how aesthetic representations and meanings of the forest are situated in the politics of resource access and control. While previous work has looked at the role of contested aesthetics within the same spatial extent, this article proposes a deeper aesthetic that takes time and the weight of history into account. Four discourse coalitions are analyzed: Native American ontological constructs of land as spatiotemporally divergent from dominant frontier sectionalism, competing epistemologies of positivist science and land-based livelihoods, perceptions of risk and geopolitical control extended to the subsurface, and the rationalization of scenic amenities and recreational access. The paper seeks to unravel different power connections to explain the emergence of land use conflict through a temporal disentanglement of the knowledge structures that have produced aesthetic meaning.

## 1. Introduction

How knowledge, power, and value systems have interacted with biophysical process to produce landscapes, and nature more broadly, for whom and to what ends, has been a central question in the evolution of the geographic tradition (Marsh, 1885; Sauer, 1925; Glacken, 1967; Turner, 1990). A more recent extension on this work addresses the aesthetics of landscapes, or how groups of individuals perceive what nature is and ought to be, what hybrid forms it might take, whose histories are relevant, and what purpose, instrumental or intrinsic, it should serve (Gobster et al., 2007; Nightingale, 2009; Van den Berg and Koole, 2006). However, with several boundary spanning exceptions (Ingold, 1993; Bender, 2002; Massey, 2006), there’s been scant attention in landscape aesthetics explicitly focused on the role that time, and by extension the weight of history, plays in the social construction of place as something political. In this paper, I use the case of a proposed hard rock mine in the Black Hills National Forest of northeast Wyoming to explore how the politics of contested landscapes are situated in historic eras of land use occupying the same space. For each group of land users in the multiple use forest community the landscape takes on symbolic meaning, a yearning to reclaim the past, for what activities

should be given precedence in access to and control of the forest and its resources. I therefore ask: how does the weight of history play into competing knowledge claims and power dynamics about how the landscape ought to look, for whom, and for what purpose?

Visions of what was, is, and should be take on distinct meanings for different user groups, whether it be those who derive benefit from the land through grazing leases, timber rights, big game hunting, off-highway vehicles, or scenic amenities. This is especially the case in multiple use landscapes, like those in the U.S. National Forest System, which are managed as a common property resource to provide equal access to and sustained provisioning of land-based resources over time, a directive promulgated through the Multiple Use and Sustained Yield Act of 1960. However, hardrock mining threatens to curtail or displace the activities of those whose livelihoods rely on this equal access regime in that extraction is designated as the “highest and best use” of the land under the General Mining Law of 1872 (Glicksman and Coggins, 1997). When coupled with the U.S. Forest Service’s utilitarian mission this affords mining corporations the legal right to take out long-term leases on public lands to access subsurface minerals. The land use conflict between the General Mining Law and that of Multiple Use can be understood not just as a contradiction of spatial scale between fixed

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deposits, local socio-ecological impacts, and multiscale forces of development (Huber and Emel, 2009), but also as a contradiction in temporal scale between historical moments reflective of knowledge, power, and cultural values of society writ large. The regulatory frameworks of 1872 and 1960, among other historical periods, remain alive, but operate in tension with the political, economic, and ecological realities of the present day.

## 2. Landscape aesthetics and the politics of scale

Contested landscapes and the aesthetic meanings that shape discourse around them are socially constructed spaces, not abstracted from reality, but rather as spaces produced through situated histories involving the politics of material production and accounts of environmental change. These aesthetic sensibilities arise from shared cultural understandings, which are deeply rooted in experiences that emerge out of collective identities and place-based understandings (Brady, 2003). Situated group histories have emerged from collections of individuals with shared material and perceptual realities that differ from those constructed by other historically-situated groups, and this can result in different imaginaries occupying the same space (Nightingale, 2009). Landscape is thus something relational, not intrinsic to the physical setting itself, but residing in human interpretations of the physical setting, which gives form and sets bounds to what is otherwise socially constructed through experience and history (Gunderson and Watson, 2007). While spatially bounded to a forest or other type of meso-scale community setting, imaginaries of landscape are at once something dialectically arrived at and caught between the broader structural processes of society – reflected through national priorities, geopolitical events, cultural paradigms – and the more local micro-politics of everyday rural work and life.

The aesthetics of landscape can be embodied in political-legal objectives. Such is the case with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, which manages for “outstandingly remarkable values” including scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural values along a designated river where each natural feature and view has its own constituency (Cathcart-Rake, 2009). But, contested landscape aesthetics aren’t just limited to collective use of common property resources or the superlatives of romanticized natural features, the politics of place so too pervade the middle ground of working, hidden, and defunct land uses like the drosscapes of post-industrial and sprawling suburban America, where reclaiming use is part and parcel to reclaiming identity (Berger, 2007). Struggles over wind turbine development bring out “who speaks for and negotiates conflicting social commitments to technology, economic values and an imagined American pastoral identity”, and highlight the role that form plays in reifying a cultural imaginary of “middle landscape” as rural working space (Phadke, 2011). Different visions of what use the landscape should serve can become mired in what is legal and therefore what is legitimated and included in the discourse of how to best manage a common resource base like a forest.

Competing visions of landscape are underpinned by real and perceived differences in the production of knowledge and power, which can be understood through situated histories of rural livelihoods and land uses. The land use conflicts from which these competing visions emerge are preceded by overlapping definitions of community – place, identity, and interest – that provide explanation for differences in how issues are constructed and framed (Duane, 1999). The working landscape is one such community, but within this hybrid and intransigent place identities and interests often diverge based on how land and resource use is collectively defined and the level of engagement with rule-setting governance mechanisms (Chase, 2015). In communities like this, conflict over who owns the landscape and how it should look can emerge from economic and cultural value placed not just on individual natural resources but on aesthetic values derived from a totality of many individual private land holdings or distinct users on public land (Walker and Fortmann, 2003). What unites these multiple use

livelihoods taking place on public lands with the rural economic and cultural activities taking place on private lands adjoining them is a collective sense of disenfranchisement over the control of and access to resources held within and flowing from state enclosure (McCarthy, 2002). Affinity with others in group formation is often an unlikely alliance based on what individuals from disparate backgrounds collectively stand against rather than what they collectively stand for (Grossman, 2005). This shared sense of local rights to use and the informal claims of individual users that persist despite state mandated limits on resource extraction are necessarily in tension with the capital accumulation of the greater forest community given the inevitable exhaustion of a proximate resource base that can result from over exploitation and degradation (Bridge and McManus, 2000). Group identity, whether about landscape aesthetics or a resource base, is about claims to power – be it scientific legitimacy and degree of truthfulness, or pre-determined state narratives on the causal agents and consequences of environmental change (Leslie-Bole and Perramond, 2017). Discourses and narratives surrounding contested meaning in landscapes are therefore epistemological issues, “because they require us to ask about the process through which knowledge is created and evaluated, and how particular understandings of the world relate to organized and specific systems of logic, belief, and authority” (Rikoon, 2006).

Aesthetic and environmental values that have been shaped by epistemological constructs, or habits of thinking (Willems-Braun, 1997), are mediated through political discourses, social norms, and economic power structures that are a product of history. While the ways of knowing that different groups hold on to can be buried, repressed, or sublated through dominant knowledge and power structures, they are still lived experiences that are embodied in the everyday practices of land-based livelihoods and recreational activities. Struggles over access to resources are therefore situated between the past and the present; to read and re-read the landscape through embodied labor or leisure time (itself afforded by labor) is to reproduce it in a (physical and social) form most suitable to the activity being undertaken (Jenkins, 2011). Just as the spatial scale of a resource is constructed through formal and informal processes of collective action (Rudestam et al., 2015), so too is the temporal scale of discourse and resulting rights of use arrived at through processes of contestation and consensus. As Brown and Purcell (Brown and Purcell, 2005) note, the spatial and temporal are mutually constitutive in defining the scale of discourse: “scales and scalar arrangements aren’t only fluid and processual, they can also be routinized into relatively enduring and hegemonic structures for certain periods of time.” Dialectically speaking, historical narratives of prior land use, anticipated timelines for development, seasonally uneven hydrological or ecological impacts, and the length of access to the public comment process are all factors which both shape the spatiotemporal scale of discourse and are arrived at as the product of the discourse process itself.

Periods of struggle over what resource use should predominate and what groups have the right to utilize it can be understood as struggles over scale between the existing local context and broader state-market forces situated in temporally distinct, though non-serial, eras of dispossession, accumulation, enclosure, and access. While historical conditions may be imperceptible to the uncritical gaze, the knowledge and power dynamics that sustain contending visions of landscape reflect values that are situated in history and reified through group identity in the present day. These spatiotemporal categories are thus constructed not only by *a posteriori* observers, but also by the contemporaneous agents under study. There is nothing inherent about scale in so far as the ontological dichotomies of determinism and contingency are concerned, rather the relative importance of scale changes over time with the emergence of phenomena, and the multiplicity of structural and agential interactions therein (Stallins, 2012). So too does scale vary across an epistemological continuum from relativism to logical positivism as the product and process of social realities that construct and manipulate knowledge amid a complex array of emergent hierarchies,

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