



Perspective Essay

Rural landscape, nature conservation and culture: Some notes on research trends and management approaches from a (southern) European perspective



Mauro Agnoletti*

Laboratory for Landscape and Cultural Heritage, Department of Agricultural Food and Forestry Systems, University of Florence, Florence, Italy

HIGHLIGHTS

- Historical landscapes are important.
- Nature conservation is discussed.
- Protected areas do not protect landscape.
- International directives.

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing interest today in landscape as an important perspective in sustainable development. A landscape perspective is being promoted at the global level by all of the most important institutions and through important regional directives and policies. The opportunities presented by a landscape-based approach for the European continent mark out the landscape as a possible new paradigm for our development model, with the aim of harmonious integration of social, economic and environmental factors in space and time. Current socio-economic trends, favoring abandonment and industrialization and conservation policies, supporting and promoting renaturalization, are threatening the loss of critical heritage resources. However, while socio-economic trends are difficult to change, more attention should be placed in conservation strategies. The rural landscape is largely a historical product and the time has come to assess it accordingly, identifying not only its threats and criticalities, but also challenging the policy directives and research approaches developed in recent decades that are negatively affecting the conservation and management of values associated with it. At the policy level, international directives dealing with have reinforced the trend toward cultural globalization by often overlapping the idea of nature with that of landscape, encouraging renaturalization, particularly in the form of forest cover, and neglecting ancient landscape patterns and the long and rich cultural history that led to their creation. It is important to encourage the recognition of a different level of biodiversity, biocultural diversity, looking for examples of positive integration between society and environment occurring in the rural landscape.

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1. Introduction

There is currently a growing interest in landscapes as an important perspective in sustainable development, and it is being promoted at the global level by important institutions, such as

UNESCO, FAO, CBD, and IUCN,¹ and through important regional directives and policies, such as the European Landscape Convention and European Common Agricultural Policies (CAP) 2014–2020. A landscape-based approach for the European continent presents landscapes as a possible new paradigm for a developmental model that would harmoniously integrate social, economic, and environmental factors in space and time.

* Corresponding author. +39 055 3288676.
E-mail address: mauro.agnoletti@unifi.it

¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO); Convention on Biodiversity (CBD); International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Landscape is largely a cultural construct and exists in a state conceived of or to a certain extent “planned” by human beings in consideration of its natural components. However, current strategies and actions applied to the planning and management of landscape resources, as well as the scientific literature supporting landscapes, suggest that more work is required. Although this concern is global, the need to promote and implement conservation and valorization of cultural features of the rural landscape is particularly important in Europe. The current socio-economic trends that favor abandonment, industrialization and conservation policies and support and promote renaturalization are threatening the loss of critical heritage resources. Although these trends are difficult to change, more attention must be given to heritage conservation strategies.

2. The European rural landscape

The cultural nature of rural European landscapes and their historical roots have been previously described in studies conducted by this author and other recognized scholars (Agnoletti, 2012; Antrop, 1997; Parrotta & Troster, 2011; Rackham, 1986). The continent boasts a rich heritage of rural landscapes built up over thousands of years; landscapes that continue to evolve while retaining evidence of their historical origin, albeit with different degrees of integrity, and maintaining active roles in society and the economy. Landscapes classified as rural comprise 95% of the territory of the EU. Furthermore, 66% of the EU population lives in rural areas, generating 45% of the gross value of the EU and providing 53% of its employment, whereas agriculture and forestry account for 77% of land use.

According to Carl Sauer (1925), “a cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a culture group. Culture is the agent, the natural area the medium, the cultural landscapes the result” (p. 343). In 1961, the agrarian historian Emilio Sereni wrote: “the agrarian landscape is the form that man, in the course and for the ends of his agricultural productive activities, impresses on the natural landscape” (Sereni, 1997, p. 33). Considering only these definitions among the many existing definitions, we might conclude that most of the European landscape, especially in the Mediterranean basin and in many densely populated areas, has a cultural origin that is indissolubly tied to farming, forestry and grazing practices (Grove & Rackham, 2001). In this respect, these practices can remain active or be interrupted but the resulting type of environment has always a cultural origin.

The many ways in which humans have shaped the natural landscape over the centuries have also produced some of the most representative manifestations of diverse cultural identities on the European continent (Pitte, 1994). A complex set of ingenious and diversified techniques has fundamentally contributed to the survival of the population and construction and conservation of the historical, cultural and natural heritage. These techniques were a means of continuously adapting to difficult and changing environmental conditions to provide multiple goods and services that improved the standard of living and gave rise to landscapes of great beauty. On par with other evidence of the past, the landscape is a repository of cultural values, the importance of which must be assessed from an environmental perspective. What distinguishes the complexity of the historical character of landscapes is the multiplicity and stratification of footprints left by so many distinct civilizations. Over the course of time, settlement and activity provide a wealth of diversity in the form of new plant species, cultivation techniques, plantations and methods of land delimitation, water collection and use, and buildings and terrain structures imbuing the historical character of each region of Europe with special and unique values. We must also note that landscapes, merging

in an original synthesis the beauty of a place with its historical character and diverse habitats, are also documents of past civilizations that are admirable as esthetic works and representations of the genius of their builders. For these reasons, landscape heritage is a fundamental resource that must be safeguarded. It should also be remembered that, in contemporary society, landscapes can have values that extend beyond the interests of the immediate social group that contributed to their present configuration because of, in some contexts, their broader worth as public goods at regional, national and global levels.

If the rural landscape is such a historical product, then the time has come to assess it accordingly by identifying its threats and criticalities and challenging the policy directives and research approaches developed in recent decades that are negatively affecting the conservation and management of values associated with landscapes. At the policy level, international directives involving landscapes have resulted in outcomes within legal and administrative spheres that deeply affect the ways in which administrators manage landscapes and the broader public perception of landscapes. These directives have reinforced the trend toward cultural globalization by often overlapping the idea of nature with that of landscape, encouraging renaturalization, particularly in the form of forest cover, and neglecting ancient landscape patterns and the long and rich cultural history that led to their creation.

In turn, there has been a growing tendency favoring the scientific study of landscapes more as a natural resource than as a cultural phenomenon. One of the reasons for this is the lack of a more diversified approach to research activity. Most of the EU projects dedicated to landscape are incorporated into environmental research that has objectives and methodologies that focus on a narrow ecological point of view, with little attention given to its cultural aspects or to the knowledge gained through the humanities and social sciences. While historical ecologists have been aware of the inadequacies of such a one-sided approach for more than a decade (Balée, 1998), this scientific discipline, even in recent workshops, has done nothing more than acknowledge that the problem exists. This disparity has also recently been recognized at a high scientific level by the European Science Foundation’s COST RESCUE² initiative, which stressed the need for change (Holm et al., 2013). The reduced importance of the humanities has also been addressed during a meeting in September 2013 organized in Vilnius by the Lithuanian presidency of the EU, which produced the “Vilnius Declaration” that stressed the appropriate inclusion of social sciences and humanities in the new EU research funding program, Horizon 2020.

Publications focused on landscape studies further exacerbate the problem. Even journals such as this one, which are dedicated to planning or management as opposed to ecology or biology, mostly appear to consider landscape from an ecological point of view and in the context of nature conservation. In terms of the production of and value placed on knowledge, papers published in scientific journals are distributed among researchers in disciplinary fields, and the productivity of scientists is largely evaluated by the quality and number of papers they publish. Conversely, books and book chapters that tend to provide both a broader and deeper perspective on research matters often garner little career recognition and are mostly distributed among those in the humanities. This difference also tends to bias the value of knowledge toward an ecological or environmental approach to landscape studies.

These trends in policy, theory, and scholarly communication have had important practical side effects, of which three are particularly problematic: assessing landscape degradation, interpreting

² European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST); Responses to Environmental and Societal Challenges for our Unstable Earth (RESCUE).

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