



Understanding public perceptions of landscape: A case study from Gozo, Malta

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A B S T R A C T

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The European Landscape Convention (ELC) establishes public participation as both an instrumental and substantive goal. Indeed, the ELC defines the very notion of landscape as “*an area as perceived by people...*”. There is thus an important role to be played by perception research in determining how the ELC can best be implemented in practical terms. The present paper aims to assess how an understanding of public perception can usefully inform local implementation of the European Landscape Convention. To address this aim, we use a case study on the island of Gozo (Malta). An Internet survey mechanism was used to identify public views on the concept of landscape and aspects of landscape character and change. Results were evaluated with reference to (i) coherence between the ELC and public views, and (ii) local capacity to participate in decision-making. Findings indicate that the notion of ‘landscape’ in public understanding does not fully reflect the concept and scope of the ELC. However, substantial knowledge of, and interest in, landscape matters was apparent amongst the public, and there was also significant consensus across different respondent groups. The study highlighted key areas of concern for implementation of the ELC, including the need for improved communication between policy-makers and the public and the need to address the perceived ineffectiveness of public participation mechanisms.

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Introduction

2010 marks the ten year anniversary of the adoption of the European Landscape Convention (ELC), the first international legal instrument to be exclusively concerned with the protection, management and planning of all landscapes in Europe. The ELC was formulated in response to growing concern across Europe about the nature and scale of landscape change, increasingly seen to result in a loss of distinctive local character (Phillips, 2000). The convention aims to encourage public authorities to adopt policies and measures at local, regional, national and international level for protecting, managing and planning landscapes throughout Europe, so as to maintain and improve landscape quality, and foster a recognition of the value and importance of landscape. It provides for appropriate strategies and measures to be determined by different signatory states (*parties*) tailored to their requirements, whilst fostering European wide cooperation. The ideal of the ELC is expressly democratic (Priour, 2006), seeking to safeguard the

quality of *all* landscapes, with the full and participatory involvement of the public (Council of Europe, 2000). Specifically, the ELC:

- Defines landscape as “*an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors*” (Article 1);
- Extends the scope of concern to “*the entire territory of the parties and covers natural, rural, urban and peri-urban areas ... it concerns landscapes that might be considered outstanding as well as everyday or degraded landscapes*” (Article 2);
- Requires parties to legally recognize landscapes as “*an essential component of people's surroundings, an expression of the diversity of their shared cultural and natural heritage, and a foundation of their identity*” (Article 5a);
- Requires parties to “*establish procedures for the participation of the general public...in the definition and implementation of landscape policies*” (Article 5c);
- Requires parties to identify and analyze landscapes throughout their territory, analyzing their characteristics, forces and pressures transforming them, and taking note of changes, all “*with the active participation of the interested parties*” (Article 6c); and
- Requires parties to “*define landscape quality objectives for the landscapes identified and assessed, after public consultation in accordance with Article 5c*” (Article 6d).

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Prieur and Dourousseau (2006) further emphasize that: (i) the term ‘public’ should be taken to mean civil society in its broad sense, (ii) the participation of the general public must be visible both in the definition and in the implementation of landscape policy, and (iii) that the concept of ‘consultation’ referred to in Article 6d should not be interpreted as an allowance for minimal participation.

These elements constitute a novel approach to public involvement in the planning and management of landscapes (Dejeant-Pons, 2006), requiring more use of methods for public participation (Dramstad, Tveit, Fjellstad, & Fry, 2006). However, the innovative nature of the ELC in itself presents challenges to its implementation, as existing planning tools tend to be primarily centralized instruments of the state, focused predominantly on outstanding landscapes (De Montmollin, 2006). There is thus a need for developing appropriate instruments for implementation of the ELC’s provisions, but which must be flexible in order to be tailored to the different needs of different states. De Montmollin (2006) notes that the development of the required participatory tools should:

- (i) Facilitate community input to and participation in the protection, management and planning of landscape; and
- (ii) Allow for work at local level helping communities to identify and understand the characteristics, value and vulnerability of the landscapes in which they live, and to express their aspirations.

An exploration of general public perceptions of landscape may provide a useful starting point for informing the development of such innovative participatory instruments, particularly given that not much is known about how European citizens perceive their landscapes (Palang, Helmfrid, Antrop, & Alumäe, 2005). Perception research has a long-standing history in landscape studies, with key areas of focus including the identification and understanding of beauty (e.g. Daniel, 2001; Daniel & Meitner, 2001; Lothian, 1999), the development of methods and techniques (e.g. Garcia-Perez & Peli, 2002; Ode, Tveit, & Fry, 2008; Palmer, 2004; Yamashita, 2002), and cultural, temporal and spatial variations in perceptions (e.g. Buijs, Elands, & Langers, 2009; Natori & Chenoweth, 2008). However, there are few examples of research that investigates how an understanding of perception can usefully inform the work of policy-makers, planners and managers (e.g. Brown, 2004; Brown & Raymond, 2007), and certainly much scope for further work in this area. In the light of the ELC, such an understanding of perception is necessary to manage landscapes as areas “*as perceived by people*”. Furthermore, a solid understanding of public views can enhance the effectiveness of policy-making given that “*public... perceptions are the basis of an individual's commitments to an organization and its goals and they are major influences on the behaviour of both members and leaders*” (Crowfoot & Wondolleck, 1990, p. 7).

This paper seeks to explore how an understanding of public perceptions of landscape can contribute insights for the effective implementation of the ELC. A case study, carried out on the island of Gozo (Malta) is used to assess the implications of people's perceptions of landscape for implementing the ELC, with reference to: (i) coherence between the ELC's provisions and public perception, and (ii) local capacity to contribute to the development and implementation of landscape policy. Specific objectives of the study were to:

- 1. Identify how people conceive the term ‘landscape’ (with reference to Articles 1 and 2 of the ELC);
- 2. Identify how the public perceive characteristics of landscape (with reference to Article 6c);
- 3. Identify how the public perceive forces and pressures of change in the landscape, (with reference to Article 6c);

- 4. Explore how the public would like landscapes to be in the future (with reference to the definition of landscape quality objectives, as specified in Article 6d);
- 5. Assess the range of public views across different community sub-groups with respect to the above objectives, in order to identify the extent of consensus and/or conflicting opinions;
- 6. Derive insights for successful implementation of the ELC within the case study region, based on the above five objectives.

Methods

Study area

The subject of landscape is of relevance to societies across the world; however, each landscape needs to be managed with reference to its own specific context. For this reason, a case study approach was selected for this research. Malta is a small island state situated in the central Mediterranean Sea, with a total land area of 320 km² and a population of over 410,000 (National Statistics Office, 2009a), resulting in one of the highest population densities (1281 persons/km²) in the world. Gozo, which served as the study site for this work, is the second largest island of the Maltese archipelago (67.1 km²), with a resident population of circa 31,000 people, and a transient population of domestic and international visitors numbering over 700,000 per year (National Statistics Office, 2009a). Both islands have been almost continuously inhabited since the Neolithic period, ruled by a series of colonizers until acquiring Independence in 1964 (Blouet, 1992). Formal spatial planning and environmental management have a relatively young history, dating back to the early 1990s (Cassar, 2010), and although landscape concerns are integrated into other sectoral policies and regulations, there has to date been only one formal strategic study on landscapes (Malta Environment and Planning Authority, 2004), which is still in draft format.

The island of Gozo has been strongly influenced by its relative isolation from the outside world, with a ferry service and until recently, limited helicopter access, providing the only links to the main island of Malta. Unlike Malta, which has several large, sheltered harbours, Gozo is practically unindented and Mgarr, where the ferry berths today, is an artificial harbour built in the 1970s (Department of Information, 2002). Gozo was also ‘isolated’ politically for a long time, with primitive services, bureaucratic neglect and lack of opportunities in all sectors (Tabone, 1996); as a consequence, there was little large-scale alteration of the island's traditional landscape. The situation is, however, changing rapidly. Gozo has made a quantum leap in terms of development in recent years, with new and varied opportunities in various fields (e.g. education, industry and tourism), inevitably manifested through changing landscapes. It is thus in particular need of a strategic framework for landscape planning, and the provisions of the European Landscape Convention potentially have much relevance³. The island therefore provides a useful setting for exploring the objectives of this research. As an additional advantage, it comprises a distinct spatial unit with clear boundaries, thus facilitating the research in terms of methodology. Furthermore, it is of interest to several groups of stakeholders (notably local residents, Maltese visitors and international visitors), who value the region for different purposes, thus potentially providing some indication of the likely range of views within a community. The research could also provide useful insights for the ratification and implementation of the ELC in the Maltese context.

³ Malta signed the ELC (in 2000), although it has not yet ratified it.

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