



Viewing Prespa: from the Aesthetic to the Functional

People's perception of landscapes can be quite diverse. In the past, the prevalent approach focused on aesthetic aspects. Thus the 'beauty' of landscapes has been immortalised in painting, photography, cinema and literature (1). Such 'beauty' has also evolved diachronically, from the rural Arcadian approach of the 15th century to depictions of the urban skyscraper milieu of the early 20th. Even in landscape painting, the subject matter has shifted constantly following changes in social preferences.



An issue that remained under the surface through all these changes in aesthetic trends was the degree of human intervention in landscapes. At periods there was a strong liking for 'wild', untouched landscapes, with no trace of human presence. In others, human works or their remains were incorporated harmoniously with nature, as shown in the engravings that graced the books of the adventurous voyagers of the past millennium. During the 20th century, on the other hand, there has been strong interest in the depiction of urban or urbanised landscapes, where the anthropic elements prevailed.

A different approach, which has matured during the past two to three decades, tends to consider landscapes in a more functional and objective manner, without denying the element of human perception, which is essential in the definition of landscapes (2). In this context, some of the questions to be considered are the following: What are the natural and anthropic functions that occur within landscapes? Who are the drivers of change at the level of landscape? What are the factors in play? What are the timescales involved?

From the point of view of nature, landscapes include a broad array of functions -or dynamic processes- as they may incorporate diverse ecosystems, each with its characteristic species of flora and fauna. The unimpeded performance of these functions and processes is a sign of the ecological health of a landscape, which can be hampered or enhanced by human activities. Thus, the clear-cutting of forests for timber or cultivation may result in soil erosion, which in turn will impoverish ecosystems and lead to the diminution or disappearance of species that depend on them (3). Conversely and acting for good, some traditional human activities have contributed repeatedly to biodiversity.

Thus some landscapes include areas impacted by past or current human activities while maintaining ecological value, mild examples include grazing and fishing. Other landscapes lead to a partial transformation of the natural environment, mainly through agriculture. And there are those actions that radically transform the landscape through urbanisation and large-scale works, building construction and major infrastructure projects, such as dams, harbours, airports and rail and road networks.

It shall be remembered here that unsustainable management of human activities may lead to a gradual degradation of landscape functions and thus to a diminishment of their values for human beings. The unwise use of soil and water resources in intensive agriculture, for example, usually leads to a dramatic loss of fertility and productivity, and even to the abandonment of the areas affected.

Anthropogenic activities can exert pressures on landscapes, with visible results, which can be reversed once the pressure diminishes or is removed. Intensive cultivation or grazing, for example, can drastically change the vegetation cover, but this can recover to a considerable degree once the activities are abandoned. Or the eutrophication of a lake (such as in Prespa) or lagoon can be reversed once the sources of pollution are controlled. There are, however, changes that are irreversible, such as soil erosion, desertification, urbanisation and public works construction.

Of course, it should be stressed here that not all changes are negative; there are those that can be considered highly positive as to their impact. But who is to judge and with what criteria? In a democratic society, ultimately it should be the public. But does the public have the necessary knowledge and the means to express its collective will in relation to decisions that will have long-term impacts? And how do the views of minorities -especially in multicultural societies- or of visitors and the international community, find an equitable hearing? The politically delicate question of 'ownership' of landscapes by indigenous peoples and local communities and the moral rights of interested and concerned outsiders may also be taken into account.

As to criteria, the principles of sustainable use of resources can provide useful guidance. Decision making is perhaps not so difficult if one focuses on functional aspects, as rational judgment can be applied. The situation aesthetically remains highly uncertain. In traditional societies, due mainly to the slow rate of change, a degree of common aesthetic values occurred, was cultivated and maintained. When it changed, it was also gradually and at a slow pace. Today, globalisation and the rapid means of communication are mixing up cultures and creating an aesthetic confusion. Nowhere is this more evident than in the appreciation of landscapes. For example, there was considerable consensus on the cultural landscapes of the past, from the hill villages of Tuscany in Italy, to the Meteora sacred megaliths in Central Greece, consensus at least among educated people. Is there any such consensus on the cultural landscapes of our own era, and which of them merit continued existence?

Landscapes are depositories of collective memory, sometimes with strong spiritual implications. Are collective memories, however, still meaningful for most people? Are we in danger of losing interest in the past, and thus impoverishing our future?

The purpose of the arguments presented above is to fuel the debate on landscapes. The European Landscape Convention maintains that it is concerned with all landscapes in the wider European territory. It is obvious that many of them are threatened on both the functional and the aesthetic level, and require management and care. Resources, however, are always inadequate and priorities have to be decided. These hard choices have to be made but what should be the criteria?

Prespa Lakes

The case of the Prespa Lakes, shared by Albania, Greece and the FYR of Macedonia, can provide some useful insights. Prespa, a wetland site of international importance (4), with a rich Byzantine and Ottoman cultural heritage and extremely high biodiversity, has retained to a high degree its landscapes of unique beauty, mainly due to isolation, lack of development and resources and the deadening impact of frontiers in a politically sensitive zone of the Balkans. In fact, it has been demonstrated that traditional human activities –such as extensive, small-scale agriculture and animal breeding– have resulted in the enrichment and diversification of landscapes and have contributed to the increase of biodiversity in the area.

Changes started in the 1960s with the intensification of agriculture and the construction of an irrigation system, which led to increase of the local income. Well-meaning activities by environmental organisations have made the area widely known, attracting visitors and creating a mini-tourism boom. Support from international donors, from the European Commission to UNDP, is providing new development opportunities. The establishment of the transborder Prespa Park is decreasing the isolation of the area and reducing the impact of national borders.

Combined with a lack of public planning and land use control, these initially positive factors are damaging the delicate Prespa landscapes, especially through intensifying construction for tourist facilities. Resort housing and various services no longer limited to the traditional villages, are spreading throughout the territory.

The situation however is not desperate. Already the involved parties are making an effort to use resources, especially space and water, sustainably. In this way they satisfy legitimate human needs for a better quality of life without degrading the environment. In this way, perhaps, they help re-establish the harmony between people and nature in Prespa.

Whether this is a realistic goal that can be achieved within a single generation has to be seen. Such efforts may indicate whether efforts to manage this and similar landscapes have a reasonable chance of success.

Notes

1. As documented by Peter Howard; for example in his contribution to the European Landscape Convention meeting in Strasbourg, 27-28 November 2003, entitled 'Spatial planning for landscapes: mapping the pitfalls or buttering the parsnips and avoiding the weeds'.
2. According to the definition of the European Landscape Convention, "landscape' means an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors".
3. Madagascar is a characteristic case of serious change, having lost 85% of its lush forest cover due to 'slash and burn' cultivation.
4. According to the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, 1971). Prespa includes perhaps the largest nesting colony of *Pelecanus crispus* in the world (approximately 1000 pairs), as well as large mammals and various endemic species.



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