

# HEALTH, IDENTITY, AND SENSE OF PLACE: THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL LANDSCAPES

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## Abstract

Access to the landscape and the countryside has quite different meanings for the few living in isolated rural communities and for the many who live in urban contexts, often in degraded and ecologically poor environments. The research described in this paper draws on several different projects carried out across the UK to explore the meanings that local landscapes have for rural and urban dwellers, the importance of access to natural or semi-natural landscapes and the significance this has for people's health and identity. The projects described include, firstly, a study of people's perceptions and use of local woodlands in central Scotland, using focus groups, site survey and questionnaire methodologies. The context here is the predominantly urban and post-industrial landscape of an area once reliant on mining and heavy industry. Over the last 10 years a considerable area of new woodland and forest has been established in an attempt to provide a more biodiverse environment in an area where high unemployment and industrial dereliction has left its mark. A second project, involving a similar combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, explored the attitudes in different communities in the English East Midlands towards 'nature' and landscapes they choose to visit. A third project examined people's perceptions of change, and its consequences, in a small and isolated rural landscape associated with publicly managed forest and moorland in the Highlands of Scotland. The results point to some important findings with regard to the local landscape of people's everyday lives: the qualities that define place; the central rôle of childhood experience; the value of nearby nature; the health benefits of visiting natural and semi-natural landscapes; and issues of social inclusion in relation to the landscape.

## Keywords

Landscape, facet theory, personal construct theory, social inclusion, woodlands, community forests

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last 10 to 15 years there have been two complementary developments in the UK in relation to the provision of more and better accessible "natural" landscapes closer to where people live. One is the movement to create forests and woodlands close to towns, villages and other communities, often in post-industrial or degraded landscapes, and the other has been the desire to include the population in planning and decision making. This movement is widely known as the "community forest" movement and it incorporates a range from very urban to rural locations (National Community Forest, 2003, Central Scotland Forest, 2003). Common to all areas is the desire to involve local people in local places in order to generate benefits that can range from health and well-being to the creation of environmental and social capital. Various government agencies, such as the Forestry Commission, Countryside Agency and English Nature, are the prime movers in these initiatives, as well as local authorities and local communities all over the country. The programmes were established in the early 1990s and, from small beginnings have grown into substantial projects. Towards the end of the decade, however, it was recognised by the government agencies that there was no real knowledge of

the true nature of the benefits generated by these programmes and whether they were fulfilling the needs of the populations who were supposed to benefit.

In the UK there are great differences in the availability of access to the countryside, natural areas and woodlands as a result of location, distances, social patterns and structures, economic and legal factors, demographics and the ethnic composition of communities. At one level, there is the difference between the 80-90% of people who live in urban areas, or who could be said to be living in urbanised conditions and the remaining 10-20% who live in rural areas. Yet this is a simplistic division that masks more complex patterns such as rural and urban poverty, both caused by low income jobs but where the transport problems and lack of services in rural areas contrast with the degraded environments in urban areas. The ageing population is common to all locations but ethnic diversity is a feature of urban areas more than rural ones.

Against this background research has been undertaken to try to understand better the relationship people have with their environment – their activities in and their perceptions of nature, woodland, the landscape or the countryside, whatever term happens to be used (the term landscape will be used from here onwards in this paper). Three major research projects in this area have been carried out between 1999 and 2004 by members of the OPENspace Research Centre, devoted to research on inclusive access to the outdoor environment, based at Edinburgh College of Art and Heriot-Watt University. In addition an important scoping study was prepared on the issue of the unrepresentative nature of participation in countryside recreation in England. These projects were funded by the Forestry Commission, English Nature and the Countryside Agency, all government agencies whose policies were moving into the social realm, away from an emphasis on resource or landscape management (timber production, nature conservation, landscape protection), although all three have been heavily involved in promoting access and recreation for many years.

These projects, while different in emphasis, each involved exploring how people interact with their local landscape as opposed to the landscape in general or that of special or designated areas of importance. This is partly because, in order to solve problems of providing inclusive access, people must be able to visit places close to where they live, but also because it is with the places where we live that we develop the closest relationships. It is also the case that community participation and involvement can only operate at a local level. Thus, it is evidently most important to understand more about local landscapes. This does not mean that the results of the research need only apply to the localities where the research was undertaken. In two of the three projects described here, a number of different locations and their local populations were sampled so that wider application of the results is possible.

### **Research methodology and theoretical basis**

A common feature of all of the projects described in this paper is the theoretical basis, structure and methodology adopted for them. It has become a strong feature of research carried out by OPENspace to base the methodology in Personal Construct Theory (PCT) (Kelly 1955), in Canter's Theory of Place (Canter 1977) and to use Facet Theory (Shye et al, 1994) as a means of structuring the research itself. PCT has shown that people bring previous experiences, expectations and their personal objectives in a place to any evaluation they make of the place. According to Canter, the qualities of place are composed of three elements: the physical attributes of the environment, the activities people engage in and the perceptions they have. When exploring the contribution of the local landscape to people's lives it is necessary to consider all three elements and the interaction between them. The main advantage of using the Facet Approach in relation to this is that it facilitates the explicit structuring of the central issues in the research and their relationships to one another. While this is often considered to

be inherent in scientific investigation, it is easy to miss key issues and their inter-relationships unless they are explicitly expressed (Borg & Shye 1995).

After an initial scoping of issues and the literature, in order to formulate the detailed research questions, the research was always user-led. The issues to be explored in relation to people's engagement with place were identified by local communities, either through the use of focus groups or a number of individual, semi-structured interviews. The qualitative data thus gathered could be categorised under the headings of the physical landscape, people's activities or perceptions, and were then used as the basis of the content of a questionnaire for gathering a more representative sample of data capable of quantitative analysis. The questionnaire in each case was developed using Facet Theory.

Each research project is described briefly below, so that the common themes and central issues can be illustrated and drawn out more explicitly.

### **Project 1. Open space and social inclusion: local woodland use in central Scotland (Ward Thompson et al 2004).**

#### *Research context*

The Central Belt of Scotland lies between the cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, roughly bounded to the north by the Ochil and Campsie Hills and to the south by the Pentland Hills. The area is characterized by a rolling, low-lying landform, a number of small to medium sized settlements (villages and towns) and major transport corridors. The major development in a number of settlements dates from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when heavy industry and coal mining dominated the economy. The area includes some 20<sup>th</sup> century New Towns and, in places, more recent growth of "sunrise" industries have brought prosperity. However, there remains in many communities a demographic structure with high levels of unemployment and relatively low incomes, poorer living environments and services, and low level of access to personal transport.

The area has been the subject of long-term attempts at environmental improvement and a number of forest plantations were established as commercial enterprises. The movement to create and manage community woodlands has been a more recent activity. The resulting combination of publicly and privately owned woodland and forests, which many settlements have within relatively easy travelling distance of people's homes, represent an important recreational resource potential for day-to-day use by the local population.

#### *The research aims and objectives*

The research project sought to answer four basic questions:

- How important is forest use to local people? What proportion of the population and which segments of the population use forests?
- Which forests and woodlands do people choose to use or abuse?
- How do people use forests and what counts as use or abuse?
- What are the design and management implications for forest managers?

#### *Case Study Communities*

After the initial scoping stage, five communities were chosen for study to represent a range of conditions and locations typical of the area. The focus groups and questionnaire surveys were based on these, so that comparisons could be made and generalisations drawn between the different communities. Focus groups were carried out in the local communities and the questionnaire survey was undertaken in public places such as high streets, to get a representative sample of the population.

## *Results*

Focus groups indicated that the choice of woodlands and forests for recreational purposes is mainly driven by proximity to where the users live. Woodland type, e.g. coniferous or broadleaved, appears to have much less influence on choice of where to go. Facilities, e.g. for cycling or children's play, are factors which determine use and, although many people prefer open woodland, some users, including teenagers, like woodlands as places in which to hide or to get away from others. Woodlands have evidently been the location for many vivid and positive experiences of engagement with the landscape, often associated with childhood memories. Despite this, many people consider the opportunities for woodland enjoyment are more constrained than they were a decade or more ago. The two factors most mentioned as preventing fuller use of woodlands are safety and forest abuse. The dumping of rubbish and general littering of many woodlands does not always completely deter people, but encounters with others who may be vandalising things or behaving anti-socially will. Fears for safety, whether because of other people or from injury (particularly among elderly users) were mentioned as deterrents to people using woodlands alone.

The questionnaire results (n=339) revealed apparently distinct categories of visitors:

- Those who visit daily, often for walking the dog; these are the only group who generally visit woodlands alone;
- Those who visit weekly, regular visitors who have the most positive views about feeling safe, at home and free from anxiety in woodlands;
- Those who visit monthly, who share some of the perception characteristics of the weekly visitors, but to a lesser degree, and who are most interested in woodlands free from rubbish and in information boards and signage;
- Those who visit once a year, who are least likely to visit woodlands alone, most positive about signs through the woodlands, and who share some characteristics with those who never visit woodlands at all in feeling less at home there.

The qualities of woodlands which attracted the strongest responses overall related to liking woodlands that are free from rubbish and people feeling 'at peace' in a woodland. In general, people disagreed strongly with suggestions that they consider woodlands as scary and that they fear having an accident there. This suggested that the focus group responses about fears for safety in woodlands were not typical of the population as a whole but reflected sub-groups' perceptions. These were explored further. Compared to men, women had stronger preferences for signs leading through the woods and for group and family activities, such as picnics, and were less likely to walk alone. Men were generally positive about walking alone and felt much less vulnerable in woodlands than women. Crucially, the frequency of people's woodland visits as children is related to the frequency of adult visits and to how comfortable adults feel walking in woodlands alone. Usage was also affected by age: those over 45 years old were less likely to visit for specialist outdoor activities, although the 55–64-year-old age group were an exception to this.

The strength of the relationship between childhood visits to woodlands and adult patterns of visiting was the key message to arise from the statistical analysis.

## **Project 2: Nature for People: the Importance of Green Spaces to Communities in the East Midlands of England (Bell et al 2004)**

### *Research context*

The East Midlands of England is a region of mixed land use and landscape. It comprises the counties of Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire. Lincolnshire is largely an agricultural county with a coastline and Derbyshire includes the

Peak District National Park. All the counties apart from Lincolnshire have areas of significant extractive industry, especially deep coal mining and open cast iron ore working. These have left large areas of disturbed land, which have often been restored to woodland. Several large cities or towns can be found in the region, with significant proportions of ethnic minorities among their populations. The green spaces available to these populations range from waste land used informally; formal city parks, many dating from the Victorian era; country parks, often established on former industrial land; remnant woodlands now lying within the boundaries of urban areas; nature reserves of woodland, wetland, heathland and coastland; and open upland moorland (in the Peak District).

### *The research aims and objectives*

The aim of the project as specified by English Nature, was “to specify the contribution that “nature” in green spaces make to people’s social well-being by examining the use people make of, and the feelings that they have towards, a selected number of artificial and more natural green space sites distributed throughout the East Midlands”.

### *Case Study Sites*

As this was a regional study, a number of sites were selected to fall more or less equally in each of the region’s counties and to represent a range of urban, suburban and rural conditions. Focus groups were carried out in the local communities and questionnaires were carried out in the different green space sites themselves.

### *Results*

Key points raised by participants in the focus group discussions are summarized below

Nature and green space:

- The terms “nature” and “green space” are very hard to define.
- Definitions are influenced by cultural perceptions of the natural environment.
- Nature cannot be considered in isolation from the world of human activity.
- Green space can be land over which residents feel they have little or no control.
- Green space can be a small pocket of land in an urban area that is badly maintained and unsafe to use.
- Green spaces can also be very precious.

Social benefits:

- The key forms of anti-social behaviour are fly-tipping, litter, vandalism, dogs (mess and running loose) and intimidation from large groups of young people.
- Anti-social behaviour can prevent the implementation of green initiatives.
- Management must be visible whilst at the same time being sensitive to the location.
- There is currently an imbalance between preservation and access to sites of special interest.
- Children are not encouraged to explore and take an interest in nature.
- Parental attitudes towards, and ability to undertake, nature education have changed significantly over the last 50 years.
- The educational system must take responsibility for nature education.
- There is a lack of effective interpretation.
- Green initiatives instill a sense of ownership and encourage responsible behaviour.

The importance of having green spaces nearby:

- There are many social, mental and physical benefits that can be derived from access to nature and green spaces.
- All the participants felt that access to nature was important, although in some cases the knowledge of nearby nature and green spaces was enough to instil a sense of wellbeing.
- Members of minority ethnic groups are rarely approached to take part in green initiatives and are unsure of where to obtain information.
- Sign posting and information given at sites is often inadequate and not very informative.
- All attempts to provide inclusive access should be sensitive to the location.

The questionnaires (n=459) developed on the basis of the focus group findings revealed that many people visit all type of green or natural sites, regardless of age or sex. However, the sample revealed disproportionately low numbers of people from black and ethnic minorities and people with disabilities as visitors. While many people visit on their own, couples and families make up the majority of visitors, the latter especially at country parks and other sites with special facilities and wildlife displays.

Women visitors were under-represented in comparison with the general population. Comparatively low numbers of unemployed people were recorded as visitors but many retired people appear to visit. The findings about women seem to confirm previous studies showing that women tend to be significantly less frequent visitors than men to woodland or countryside sites (Burgess 1995, Ward Thompson et al 2004). It may reflect the concerns expressed by women in the focus groups over safety, and women's responses in the attitudinal section of the questionnaire, where feelings of vulnerability were also rated strongly.

Teenaged children are also infrequent visitors compared with younger children. One of the possible causes of this is that what urban teenagers frequently consider "outdoor" places to visit are in fact indoor spaces such as arcades and malls (Travlou, 2003). It may be a particular phenomenon of this age group. Læssøe and Iversen (2003), in an in-depth qualitative study of the importance of nature in every-day life, found that youth generates a discontinuity with the nature relationships of childhood because a lot of energy is put into social relations during this phase. The findings also bear out other research into the relationships teenagers and children have with outdoor places such as woodlands (Bell et al 2003).

There were few people from black and ethnic minorities visiting any of the green spaces. This seems to follow a common pattern in the UK, as there is a range of evidence from the literature that black and minority ethnic communities in Britain do not participate in visiting the countryside and other natural open spaces, and related activities, proportionate to their numbers in society (Countryside Agency 2004).

The main reasons people visit green spaces are to walk the dog, to gain exercise, and for the pleasure of being in a park or close to nature. Dog walking is most popular at local sites and in woodlands and country parks, but less frequent at nature reserves. Reducing stress and relaxing are significant reasons for visiting green spaces and represent one of the main social values. The importance of dog walking in relation to green spaces has been corroborated by other studies (Ward Thompson et al, 2004, Countryside Agency survey 2003), and cannot be underestimated. In this study, focus groups identified dog fouling as being a key form of anti-social behaviour, so the tensions found elsewhere between dog-owners and other green space

users seemed to surface here too (Ward Thompson et al 2004). This, however, is not the only problem associated with dogs; a study by Madge (1997) showed that the fear of coming into contact with animals, and in particular dangerous dogs, was much higher for African-Caribbean and Asian groups than white groups.

A key message from the project was that people think of nature in quite a broad way. Nature includes physical characteristics, wildlife and also perceptions and emotions, especially peacefulness and other terms associated with the calming or de-stressing value of nature. When talking about “social values” people tended to focus on “anti-social uses”. There is much evidence that sites need to be well managed (but not over managed), welcoming, provide information and have a natural appearance if people are to obtain the best value from them. Sites close to home are preferred, especially by those who used to visit frequently when children.

### **Project 3: Local perceptions of landscape and community at Strathdon (Ward Thompson and Scott Myers 2003)**

#### *Research context*

Strathdon is a large valley lying in the north east of Scotland and is part of the Cairngorms mountain range. It contains a number of small, scattered and remote rural communities. The landscape contains some forest and also the potential for much more afforestation. The area features a number of traditional Scottish estates, each of which contains a mixture of upland farming, forestry, deer stalking, grouse shooting and salmon fishing. Some members of the community are tenant farmers or estate workers. Tourism is presently a small element in the valley economy compared with many other parts of Scotland. The community is tightly knit and is already involved in a number of community projects and initiatives.

#### *The research aims and objectives*

The research sought to explore the perceptions of the landscape and community by seeking answers to four basic questions: what people like about Strathdon, what they do not like, what they would like to see changed and what they would like to see stay the same.

#### *Results*

Semi-structured interviews with individuals took the place of focus groups in this research (Breakwell 1990, Robson 1993). The results were grouped into those issues relating to the physical environment and economic considerations which enable or prevent people from continuing to live there. The physical landscape around Strathdon was a defining feature of the village. People liked the remoteness of Strathdon but also being within reach of larger towns and amenities. They felt that road access could be improved to encourage tourists to visit, which would then generate income. However, this needed to be balanced with maintaining the spirit of the community and was one of the central debates linking many aspects of the place evaluation: how to increase revenue whilst not spoiling the beauty and isolation of Strathdon or its community.

In general, the interviewees liked the physical setting of the village. They understood the economic demands and benefits of farming the land and the changes that happen when trees are grown for a crop. While the remoteness presented problems for getting to some amenities, this was generally seen as a trade off with the perceived benefits of living in a remote place.

The social environment is represented by the strong community, the friendly people, their helpfulness and acceptance of different behaviours. The people and the community were the strength of the place and the reason that many liked to live there. One issue that may force integration between long-standing residents and “incomers” is the economic state of the village. The population has already decreased and the composition of the village has altered

as new people come in. Tourism is a possible avenue for income, but this seems to be a struggle both in terms of getting support in the inevitable conflict between bringing visitors to Strathdon and keeping the character of the place. Without new sources of income however, it seems possible that Strathdon will fail to support itself, and there is the possibility that all the village services will disappear and with them the heart of the village. For many, the accepted practices and traditions of the village are part of their personal identity and also what they believe Strathdon to be. This definition of self is well documented within psychology (Breakwell 1986, 1992, 1993) and its relationship with the physical environment is also well established (Korpela 1992, Twigger-Ross & Uzzell 1996).

The overall implications from these findings are that the people of Strathdon are very attached to the village and regard it as not only their current home, but also where they always wish to be. This is a strong place attachment, and one that is likely to be influenced by the historical factors.

## **CONCLUSION**

The above projects may be set in a broader context by the results of a scoping study for the English Countryside Agency carried out by OPENspace Research Centre, to survey barriers to access and enjoyment of the countryside (Countryside Agency 2004). This found evidence that many groups in Britain – young adults, low-income groups, black and other ethnic minority communities, people with disabilities, older people, and women – do not participate in countryside and related activities proportionate to their numbers in society (Ageyman, 1990, Breakell, 2002, Countryside Agency 1998, 2002, DTZ Pidea 2001, Slee et al 2002). However, exclusion cannot automatically be inferred from under-representation; a group that is underrepresented may not feel excluded if it has full access but still declines to participate in countryside activities. Social, physical and psychological barriers significantly influence the way that people perceive the countryside and how they make choices over whether or not to use it. Many barriers to access and participation were identified in the literature but it also suggests that participation in countryside activities can offer a range of benefits, including enhanced physical health and general well-being, the development of social and personal skills, enhanced community development and cohesion and improved quality of life. The research projects outlined above add to the evidence which supports and amplifies some of these issues.

The three research projects briefly described in this paper demonstrate that the relationship that people have with the physical environment or landscape is a personal one, constructed through the medium of social and economic activities and perceptions. Canter's three elements of place, the physical attributes of the environment, the activities people engage in and the perceptions they have, are all important in exploring the contribution of the local landscape to people's lives. The results show that, in exploring people's attitudes to and perceptions of their local area, qualities of the social environment may appear to override in importance many qualities of the physical environment. This has been shown in previous studies of place (Donald 1994a, 1994b, Scott 1998) and it is accepted that, while the physical environment has a significant role to play in everyday life, this role may not always be explicit unless a feature of the physical environment obstructs, prevents or otherwise interferes with a person's objective. This is not to diminish the value of the physical landscape, whose natural qualities were clearly appreciated by people in all the projects, but it suggests that the social context must also be taken into account by planners, designers and managers.

Evidence of the benefits to health and wellbeing provided by green areas is increasing. Feeling at peace and getting away from stress was associated in the projects with relaxation and nature - seeing it, being in natural places and learning about it. This supports findings from other studies where it has been shown that leisure activities in natural settings or

exposure to natural features have important stress reduction or restoration effects (Kaplan, S. 1995, Parsons et al, 1998; Sheets and Manzer, 1991; Ulrich, 1981; Ulrich, 1984 Ulrich et al 1991). However, it is important to provide the right kind of green areas in the right places. Locally accessible green areas are particularly important, especially for children.

There are significant associations between the type and degree of use of green spaces by people now and how frequently they visited such sites when children. This suggests that if children are not being allowed or encouraged to visit natural areas or other parks by themselves, they are less likely to develop a habit that will continue into adulthood. Using green areas and becoming comfortable with them as a child has significant implications for continuing use as an adult and the related potential for maintaining or improving health later in life. However, there are many social groups whose level of use, even of accessible, local green areas is low and efforts need to be continued to explore why that is and to remove barriers to use. Green areas need to be local, safe and inclusive, free from the signs of litter and abusive behaviour so as to become true places, part of the social as well as the physical landscape.

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# SANTE, IDENTITE ET PERCEPTION DU MILIEU QUOTIDIEN :L'IMPORTANCE DE PAYSAGES LOCAUX

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## Résumé

Avoir accès aux paysages et à la campagne signifie des choses bien différentes pour le peu de gens qui vivent dans des communautés rurales isolées et pour la multitude des milieux urbains, milieux souvent dégradés et écologiquement pauvres. La recherche ici décrite exploite plusieurs études différentes exécutées à travers le Royaume-Uni pour analyser la signification que porte les paysages locaux pour les résidents ruraux et urbains, l'importance de l'accès aux paysages naturels ou semi-naturels, et la signification que ceci pourrait avoir sur la santé des populations et leur sens d'une identité propre.

Les études décrites comprennent une analyse de la perception qu'ont les gens, ainsi que l'emploi qu'ils en font, de forêts locales au centre de l'Ecosse, les études utilisant des groupes focaux, de la reconnaissance sur le site et des méthodologies du questionnaire. La situation ici examinée est un paysage essentiellement urbain et post-industriel dans une zone jadis dépendante de l'industrie minière ou lourde. Depuis les dix dernières années, une surface boisée considérable fut aménagée dans un effort d'établir une ambiance biologiquement plus diversifiée dans un milieu où un chômage important et une déréliction industrielle ont laissé leurs traces. Cette recherche fut commandée par la *Forestry Commission* dans le but d'améliorer la livraison de bénéfices aux communautés, y compris des valeurs de récréation et la participation de la communauté, qui font partie de l'objectif de la forêt soutenable.

Une troisième étude explore la perception de la mutation, et de ses suites, d'un petit paysage dans les *Highlands* (les zones montagneuses) d'Ecosse, paysage rural et isolé, que les gens associent avec des surfaces boisées et marécageuses aménagées par les autorités publiques. L'étude est basée sur des interviews structurées et semi-structurées pour mettre à jour les principes et les issues qui gouvernent les attitudes envers les altérations, ainsi que le défi qui consiste à faire participer les gens matériellement intéressés aux enquêtes.

Les conclusions éclairent certains traits importants en ce qui concerne la perception des paysages où se déroule la vie quotidienne : les qualités qui définissent l'espace ; le rôle primordial joué par les expériences d'enfance ; la valeur accordée à la proximité des milieux naturels ; les bienfaits pour la santé qu'offrent les visites aux paysages naturels ou semi-naturels ; des aspects relatifs à l'inclusion sociale par rapport aux paysages. La discussion de clôture de cette contribution fait également appel à l'expérience que les auteurs ont gagnée avec l'*English Countryside Agency* lors de leurs travaux visant la diversification sociologique d'accès aux paysages ruraux et la jouissance que peuvent en tirer les populations, ceci faisant partie des engagements gouvernementaux à accomplir en 2005.