Local people as shapers of sustainability of rural landscapes


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Abstract

This paper explores the landscape preferences and value assessments of local people in six Estonian counties plus two more detailed test areas. Based on questionnaires and interviews, we study the sense of place and landscape valuations of the local people. We describe which places local people value, how they assess the changes which have occurred during the last decade and which landscapes they consider characteristic to Estonia. We argue that knowledge and, thereby, identity are local and a county is too large a unit for studying this. We also suggest that there are mental borders beyond which the knowledge does not reach, that knowing the history of the area helps people to appreciate their places and maintain them and that social sustainability is crucial in landscape management.

1 Introduction

The paper has two major starting points. First, recently extensive research has been carried out worldwide to study the role of the locals in landscape. This has focused on the meaning of the landscape to the locals (e.g., [1, 2]), but also on the role the locals play in creating landscape changes [3, 4] etc. Also plenty of attention has been paid to landscape values [5].

Second, a recent planning exercise to delimit valuable landscapes for county planning in Estonia has provided excellent material about the locals' sense of place, their valuations and preference patterns. There are several research papers being published on this issue [6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11], but these address mainly the
applied problems of the exercise. The papers give a hint to how the cultural landscape has changed during the 1990s, but also raise a number of questions not answered yet.

The outcome of this planning exercise was not to create new protected areas, but rather to establish rules and examples of good practice (Leitbilder in German) for further management, so that the outstanding values indicated during the project could be taken care of and sustained. Since one of the main ideas of the plan of valuable landscapes is to preserve the landscapes that are considered valuable on one or more basis, the issue of landscape preservation has been rather central in discussing the value of a landscape [12]. This becomes even more important when we take into account social cohesion, the connectivity of landscapes in time, where the local people as carriers of landscape traditions have a crucial role to play.

The methods of the planning exercise, as well as the role different stakeholders have in this, have been described elsewhere [8, 13]. This paper focuses on how the landscape is understood, perceived, valued and interpreted by the local people and how this influences the visible landscape, continuation of the traditional human-nature interrelation and heritage.

2 Data and methods

Figure 1: The study areas.

The data behind this paper was collected during carrying out the valuable landscapes’ delimitation project in 6 (out of 15) Estonian counties (Fig.1). In
addition, more detailed studies, following similar methods were carried out in one more county—Saaremaa, and in the Otepää area as a special case study in a tourism landscape. The main reason for handling Saaremaa and Otepää separately was that they could be handled as model areas for the future of rural landscapes. The empirical material consists of 1441 filled questionnaires and 59 in-depth interviews. The questionnaires covered the wide spectrum of local people, reaching from local politicians to schoolchildren. Interviews were done with local authorities, business leaders, NGOs, nature conservation agencies, tourism people. Content analysis technique was used for processing the qualitative data.

3 Results

3.1 What is valued?

The responses to this question could be divided into two groups. The first contains concrete places, the second certain types of objects. Leaving the former aside, the latter point to cultural features such as churches, cemeteries, monuments, schools, or to outstanding natural objects, like sandstone outcrops, hills, lakes. Only very few respondents mention generalized, abstract or complex features like historic field pattern, forested landscape, bogs, etc. that are usually highly valued by experts. Some of the respondents were also able to value the function:

*When I see the maintained fields, I'm happy, because it means the grain and that in turn means food and surviving.*

Countywise, the listed places clearly indicate to the natural differences. In Harjumaa, people appreciated natural objects connected with limestone, such as waterfalls, coastal cliffs, karst features. The people of Viljandimaa, once among the richest areas of Estonia, put high value on human-influenced landscapes, such as castle hills and manor complexes. The people of Valgamaa, the most remote region, mentioned manor landscapes as valuable. An exception here was the Otepää Upland as one of the most visited regions by tourists, admired for its attractiveness for recreation and for its natural beauty - diverse landscape with certain well-known objects. Also, the Otepää people claimed that their home area carries the very values of Southern Estonia and put nature conservation values the highest. This has also historical impact as the whole Otepää region is a Nature park for more than one generation. The people of Jõgevamaa appreciated the unique drumlin field with its natural and human features. They put extra value on Palamuse, a place where some novels known by any Estonian were staged. In Põlvamaa, people tended to prefer landscapes of natural beauty, such as primeval valleys with sandstone denudations; bogs and bog lakes. Traditional villages were valued as well. The Tartu County people pointed on views: lovely little
roads, variable views, little lakes. Together with neighboring Jõgeva and Põlva, people gave high assessment to the landscapes created by the Russian Old-Believers on the shores of Lake Peipsi.

3.2 What are the biggest problems?

To answer this question, the respondents had to choose three out of six given options. Clear differences appeared in responses (Table 1). In all counties, unfitting buildings were seen as the least problem of these six. Waste was regarded as the major threat in areas adjacent to bigger towns and especially in the opinion of schoolchildren. Abandoned buildings and fallow fields were perceived as the major problems in more remote areas and by older people. Somewhat surprisingly overgrowth with bushes and too intensive felling were positioned low in the ranking.

Table 1: Major problems as perceived by locals within the study of valuable landscapes (% of all answers).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Viljandi</th>
<th>Harju</th>
<th>Põlva</th>
<th>Valga</th>
<th>Jõgeva</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Waste</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>67</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abandoned buildings</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unused fields</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overgrowth</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfitting buildings</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensive felling</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3 What are the biggest changes during the last decade?

Political changes of the 1990s have presumably been among the greatest in the living memory. With this question we wanted to know how the political changes have been translated into the visible and perceived landscape.

Generally, the answers to this question repeat the ones given to the previous question, which affirms the choice of significant matters in society. However, many people, especially in the interviews bring forward the increased concern about the landscape, the wish of people to take care of the landscape. The place they live in should look nice, beautiful, orderly, while abandonment and rural decline in general are seen as the major threat. The most repeated statement is that the homes have become much more beautiful. People indicate that human care should be visible (compare with [14]). And new buildings as well as tourism development are mostly referred to as the indicators of good life (see also [6]). And despite the rural decline, majority of younger people see the changes as positive ones, while older people tend to remember the old times with certain nostalgia.
In more touristy areas, such as Saaremaa and Otepää, people are a little bit more concerned about development. In Saaremaa people express their concern about strangers and selling land to foreigners. In Otepää people do not have these fears and seemed to welcome new tourism developments. However, also here tourism developers should respect the nature and local traditions, people said. Damages to forests were a concern in particular on some hill slopes. The more detailed study reflects general changes in landscape, loss of nice views (forestation of abandoned fields, unmanaged lake-shores and left farms) and decrease of diversity as the highest concerns. Also, it is remarkable that local people put higher responsibility for taking care of the valued landscape to the administration of Nature Park (35.2% of respondents) and less to municipality (27.3%) whereas visitors see it vice verse—26.5% for Nature Park and 34.7% for municipality.

3.4 What kind of landscapes make you feel as Estonian?

The answers distinguished well between people from the north of the country and from the rest of it. In the Harju County the most frequent answer to this was coast—coastal landscapes represented the very Estonianness. Coastal villages and cliffs were considered as most Estonian-like landscapes. Also forests and bogs were mentioned.

In Saaremaa, the respondents were asked to bring forward the features that determine the peculiarity of Saaremaa. The most prominent aspects, both among pupils and farmers, were predominantly connected with natural attributes of the landscape (60% of all answers). The more detailed examination showed vegetation type and geologic attributes (e.g. juniper shrubberies, limestone outcrops, flat relief) as the key determinants in the landscape experience. However, people, especially the adult respondents, conceived the character of the landscape as culturally constructed and listed cultural features (e.g. stone walls, windmills, historical farm and village patterns), as well as semi-natural elements (e.g. wooded, coastal and alvar meadows) of the landscape. The opinions of the promoters and county specialists collided with that of farmers and pupils.

In the Southern Estonian counties two notions appeared—forest and well-cultivated fields, also diversity landscape itself in Otepää. There were no references to concrete spots; people rather described their favorite view or landscape type:

- Gravel road.
- A river and a hay meadow on the other bank, surrounded by trees.
- Hillocky terrain with its forests, lakes and beautiful cultivates fields.
- Fields and a little stream going into the forest. Empty fields in winter.
- Palamuse with its stories and legends and the rolling fields.
- The most beautiful is Lake Pühajarv that is one of the symbols for Estonians as of the very ‘Southern-Estonian’ landscapes.
The described landscapes clearly showed the human-nature interface, the need for visible human presence to create identity. At the same time personal places tend to be small clearly defined visual spaces seen from a safe place.

4 Discussion

These questionnaires brought forward only the locals' view on their home area, but seldom gave wider contexts. The mental spaces set their limits, and people live and act within those spaces. The local knowledge was plentiful to certain limits, behind those people knew only the object that had been made famous by some or another sort of event—tourism activities etc. Keeping, maintaining and permanent upgrading of this local knowledge can strengthen local identities and thereby promote both development and sustainability. Outside the mental spaces the theories of mental mapping [15] work pretty well.

People appreciated signs of permanent residence—old manor houses, farms, ancient hilltop strongholds. During decades these objects have lost their symbolic value they once had—e.g., manors were once perceived as the very essence of the Baltic German power—which has been replaced by a feeling of beauty or belonging. Objects from the Soviet times were seldom valued—the symbolic value was still there, although even this is gradually being replaced with nostalgia that makes all things beautiful. Attitude towards the Soviet time marks also the border between generations—younger people are unable to read and understand the 'kolkhoz landscape'.

People seem to neglect objects from the previous social formation (sensu Cosgrove [16]), but value objects that come from an earlier period. At the same time there seem to be places that have always attracted people to live in. These are places with strong genius loci (see more in [17]).

The Otepää area in the Valga County is a separate case, as it is the only area in the studied counties where scenery formed the major part of the identity. It is perhaps the richest rural area in Estonia with seasonal sports and tourism landscape, where visitors are frequent, and therefore strangers were not regarded as such a serious problem as e.g. in Saaremaa. Landscape was seen as a resource for recreation, generating income through tourism, and traditions and culture were in the background (but clearly present). However, coupled with the well-expressed self-confidence of having the very 'South-Estonian' landscape this area can be used as a model for a successful future rural landscape.

4.1 How far do they know—place or landscape?

People listed places that lay in close proximity of their home. It seemed that for local people, a county was a too big piece of land; their knowledge and identities were linked to smaller units. In very many cases people divided the county into smaller units—usually three; they knew many stories about their own area, but
there were boundaries that divided the communities. These do not coincide with the current administrative borders, but often mark the former parish limits. These borders are mainly cultural; people do not have links across these, they have no reasons to visit the “other” places, hence they were unable to value the landscapes behind the “border”.

Words that repeatedly came up in the questionnaires were hill, river, lake, valley, village, castle/manor, cemetery, ruins, monument, caves, stones, church, mill, park, museum, surroundings of ..., woods, national park, but people also listed place names. It seems as if people saw one element, one function at a time, not the whole together. It can be hypothesized that the reason for this is that the actual the word for describing the whole together or a larger area was missing. There is no such notion as ‘landscape’ (in Estonian maastrik) for local countryside inhabitants; they would describe it by terms as ‘surroundings’, ‘place’ or ‘location’ (koht and paik in Estonian), ‘neighbourhood’ (kant in Estonian), ‘home’, ‘place where I was born’. At the same time, the term landscape was only used in Otepää, in the area where the mosaic hilly terrain creates small visual spaces in the hollows intertwined with panoramic views from hilltops. This pointed to the understanding of the term landscape as scenery in the everyday language rather than its more scientific uses.

4.2 Places that keep traditions

In-depth interviews revealed that there were numerous places that carried some sort of value known only by the local people, and only for them. Often these places were not significant in terms of natural beauty, cultural or conservation value. These, often nameless, personal places were connected to local traditions, customary law, and individual intimate emotions. Local people were not eager to talk about them; these stories appeared only in the second hour of the interview. These places, and emotions connected to them were often considered insignificant, as no rational explanation could be given to that valuation. However, destruction of these places or neglecting them during planning exercises might mean that the project has to fight some invisible enemy and the locals would do their best to ignore the outcome. Or, if the damage would be considered too serious, it might cause conflicts.

In Saaremaa it was principally recognized that without the continuation of traditional agricultural practices the peculiarity of landscape (semi-natural grasslands in the first place) would become extinct. The significance of coastal pasturelands, coastal and wooded meadows and alvars for people lied in being the symbols of intercourse of man and nature that has created these landscapes and that has lasted hundreds of years. Traditional agricultural land-use practices (grazing and mowing) necessary for keeping these landscape types were regarded as a mode of lacing together the utilitarian (e.g. subsistence and market value) as well as amenity merits (e.g. species diversity, identity value). These recognitions by people hinted that nature-culture interface could be regarded as the best
denominator representing different values of landscape of Saaremaa and elsewhere.

4.3 (Social) sustainability and/or alienation?

Landscapes clearly carry local traditions. Especially in country schools teachers and elderly pass on the local knowledge and children are keen to appreciate this. This becomes apparent when comparing the answers of young and older people. Young people say what they have been told; adults say what they know and have experienced. On the other hand, young people do not see the change in longer term, and they perceive the present landscape as the yardstick for their assessment. Therefore they were more superficial in identifying problems—waste was the most visible, hence it was a problem, overgrowing with brushwood took place during several years and as they could not compare, it was not seen as a problem.

Also rural and urban people saw the same place differently. In Saaremaa it has been demonstrated [9, 10] that features indicated as threats to the landscape by the locals can at the same time be considered as supporting the local development. Similarly, in Harju County people consider tourism infrastructure and service development positive to the landscapes and to economy. According to respondents (especially the young ones), tourism development was the most positive activity. Also forestry and agriculture were considered as very positive to sustaining the landscape values. Building of roads and houses were seen as making the landscape better rather than worse. The only economic activity regarded as harmful to landscape was industrial production.

The landscape heritage is not stable, it can be easily constructed. In villages where there is somebody really interested in local lore, people were much more keen to value their own places. Places become valuable only if somebody tells the place is valuable, and succeeds in convincing the other people as well. There were cases where people used the argument that the project team visited their place and appreciated it in discussion whether their place should be included in the list of valuable landscapes. In fact, this is the key to social sustainability—maintaining the oral local cultural heritage, explaining the places to the coming generations.

The problem here could be alienation. Young people are unable to read the ‘kolkhoz landscape’; older people have nostalgic memories about it, but the real value for them is somewhere else. It is not yet the landscape of the young; it is not the landscape of the elderly either. So whose landscape is it? And hence the problem—something that is no-one’s, can be easily damaged, marred, covered by waste. As an Estonian proverb says, it’s an estate’s rope, let it drag.
5 Conclusion

Landscapes are in constant changes—new things are constantly replacing old ones. At the same time landscapes are supposed to provide continuity, traditions, identity, social sustainability. Our studies show how local people try to maintain these while facing the new challenges when agriculture is not the main income generator any more. While sticking to their traditions, people are ready to accept changes, provided these changes are not too rapid and give them time to get used. Especially younger people see the changes induced by tourism positive.

Participatory planning is essential for maintaining social coherence or social sustainability. Maintaining, recreating and upgrading the local knowledge keep the places alive. At the same time it seems to be an Europe-wide problem at least that people have less and less interest (or time?) to spend on and discuss local policies. Why should they be interested in landscapes? Simply because it is their own heritage and nobody else will keep it.

Also, this heritage is not inherent, it is constructed. On one hand, it is passed from generation to generation, on the other, it is being constantly (re)constructed, forming part of local identities.

Finally, people are rediscovering that it is their landscape. No-one's landscape is not good - everybody can spoil it. Restoring the link between people and their landscapes is on of the challenges pointed out by the studies.

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References


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