

## Landscape: the relation between earth, nature, and humans

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### 1. Introduction

As a central theme for this Europarc Conference, the organizers have chosen the motto: 'A tribute to our landscape.' In this paper we will discuss some important questions around the concept of landscape: What is the precise meaning of landscape, and how has this concept developed over time? What is the relationship between landscape and nature? And what contribution can a landscape approach make for all of us working in the world of national parks?

To answer these questions we will present to you four different landscape approaches, all of which are relevant to our everyday work practice. Each of these has a slightly different emphasis, which will hopefully culminate in an overarching insight by the end of our story.



*Fig. 1: Simon Bening, Gathering twigs, Flemish painting, ca 1550*

### 2. What is landscape?

#### *The medieval concept of landscape*

Let us start with our first question: What exactly is landscape? By now, the word has been used so often on so many different podiums, that it runs the risk of becoming an empty catch-all term. For mediaeval Europeans, however, the answer to this question would have been self-evident. In those days, landscape was primarily a politically, socially, and legally informed term (Olwig, 1996; 2002). For mediaeval people, landscape was a combination of the following elements:

1. A well-defined *area* with different characteristics than its surroundings;
2. The *people* who were traditionally rooted in this area; and
3. The *habits, values and legal rules* that had developed in this particular area and by this particular population.

This three-tiered original meaning of landscape in Western society therefore focuses very clearly on regional connections between the landscape, its inhabitants, and society. Landscape, therefore, has traditionally always been human-inclusive, focusing not only on hard facts or on objectively establishing the qualities of an area, but also on collectively agreed norms and values, and an ethical, socially just, and appropriate approach to one's own living environment. From this perspective, this mediaeval definition is still very instructive in our modern times.



Fig. 2: Frescoes of Ambrogio Lorenzetti in the Salle dei Nove at the Palazzo Pubblico of Siena, Italy

### ***The visual-esthetic meaning of landscape in the Renaissance period***

During the Renaissance period the ideas on landscape moved towards a more visual-aesthetic definition: landscape as a source of beauty or truthfulness, translated into a two-dimensional image or picture. The earliest expression of this can be found in the Italian city of Siena. If you step into the Palazzo Pubblico (town hall) of this famous city, take the stairs up to the first floor, and enter the assembly hall of the fourteenth-century city council, you will see four magnificent frescoes by the famous painter Ambrogio Lorenzetti on the high walls of this hall (Burke, 1994). Lorenzetti painted these frescoes at the behest of the city council of Siena in 1338 and 1339. The work is entitled: '*The Allegory of Good and Bad Government*'. And with these paintings, Lorenzetti wanted to show the city governors in a very visual way how much their decisions impacted the city and its surroundings. On the first long wall we can see this sunny and thriving landscape full of golden wheat fields, well-cultivated vineyards, and hard-working people, while on the opposite wall we will discover blackened fields, starving farmers, and ruins of farms and water mills. As a contrast, these two paintings are extremely evocative, even for politicians.



*Fig. 3: Ambrogio Lorenzetti, fresco Gli effetti del Buon Governo, Palazzo Pubblico Siena, 1338-1339*

Essentially, what happened here was that the mediaeval political and regional concept of landscape was transformed, for the first time in history, into an image that appealed to the broader public. During the Renaissance, landscape increasingly became a visual concept: an image that you could find beautiful or ugly, that could move you or leave you cold, and with which you could experience a varying sense of connection. Landscape was also seen for the first time as an independent genre in art. Many European painters followed the example of Lorenzetti, as is clearly apparent from the multitude of later representations of landscape in the visual arts, in literature, and also in our regional marketing in the tourism sector (Bakker, 2012). For a great many people, landscape is still first and foremost a beautiful or ugly image. And I am sure that you yourself have often used landscape images to convince people of the importance of your own national park.



*Fig. 4: Jacob van Ruisdael, View of bleaching fields near Haarlem, ca 1670*


#### 4. Landscape as a social and mental construct

With this visual definition of landscape, we encounter an important issue that has been given a lot of attention in recent decades: the question of how objective our perspective on landscape actually is. When we talk about landscape to each other, to policy-makers, or to the broader public, are we all talking about the same thing? Or do we each construct our own landscape in our own minds?

This is something that researchers have been very clear about since the late 1980s. There is, of course, not one single clear and objectively defined landscape. Postmodern philosophers showed us that objective knowledge does not actually exist, and that all knowledge is strongly culturally and personally determined. Every individual, group, gender, generation, and nation have their own perspective on landscape, so there is no such thing as a single knowable landscape. '*Landscape is in the eye of the beholder*,' or as the Germans say: '*Die wahre Landschaft ist im Kopf*'. Landscape is therefore not only a concrete and tangible entity, but also and just as much a social and mental construct that encompasses many realities (Cosgrove, 1998; Wylie, 2007).

**Three ontological dimensions of landscape**  
(based on the tripartite model of Habermas)

1. The physical landscape (*matterscape*)
2. The social landscape (*powerscape*)
3. The inner landscape (*mindscape*)



Jacobs, M. (2004) *The production of mindscapes*. PhD thesis Wageningen University.

Fig. 5: Three ontological dimensions of landscape distinguished by Jacobs (2004)

In 2004, the Dutch philosopher Maarten Jacobs developed a three-dimensional landscape model in which he distinguishes in this context the following three dimensions of landscape: *matterscape*, *powerscape*, and *mindscape* (Jacobs, 2004).

First of all, there is the traditional physical dimension of landscape (*matterscape*), that encompasses the material and tangible landscape. This includes all concrete aspects of the earth, humans, and nature, and is the subject of study in disciplines such as natural science, physical geography, and classical historical geography. Knowledge of this dimension is grounded in hard facts, aspects that can be measured in line with a positivist scientific approach.

But there are also other realities. This is why Jacobs distinguishes a social dimension of landscape, which he calls *powerscape*. This refers to landscape as a spatial and social arena of mores and customs, norms, ideas, legal and social relations, ideology, religion, and economics. Knowledge in this dimension is strongly normative and often concerns value judgements, and ideas about right and wrong, justice and injustice, and it is also strongly related to language. This is the domain of social, legal, and economic sciences.

Jacobs' third dimension is the inner dimension (*mindscape*). This dimension focuses on landscape as an object of personal perception, interpretation, and meaning-making. Since this dimension is very personal, we see that landscape is represented here in very different ways, for example through language or artistic expression. In terms of research, this dimension is the domain of psychology and art history, to name a few. The personal experience of landscape is expressed in this context in terms such as truthfulness, authenticity and personal ethics.

As you can see, this makes landscape much more of an arena of competing values and value judgements. Many conflicts about landscape and nature arise precisely because the warring parties reason and operate in different dimensions. Researchers have a different perspective on a national park than the park's administrators, who in turn have a different perspective than residents or tourists. It is very important that we keep in mind these differences, and that we keep checking which of these three dimensions of Jacobs our contact persons are operating from.

This culturalist approach to landscape is also expressed in the definition of landscape of the Council of Europe. The European Landscape Convention, established in Florence in 2000 and now ratified by 40 European countries, defines landscape as follows: '*An area as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors*'. In particular, the phrase 'as perceived by people' emphasizes the cultural relativity of the concept of landscape.

## **5. The triangle model of landscape**

If we stay closer to the more concrete dimension of landscape, some interesting models have been developed that shed light on the essence of landscape. A concept that was recently developed at the Centre for Landscape Studies of the University of Groningen (The Netherlands), for example, is the triangle model (Smeenge, 2020; Schepers *et al.*, 2021). In this model, landscape is basically defined as an interaction between earth, humans, and nature. The three basic elements of every landscape appear in the corners of the triangle. Landscape is essentially the link between these three corners, which is why it appears in the middle of the triangle.

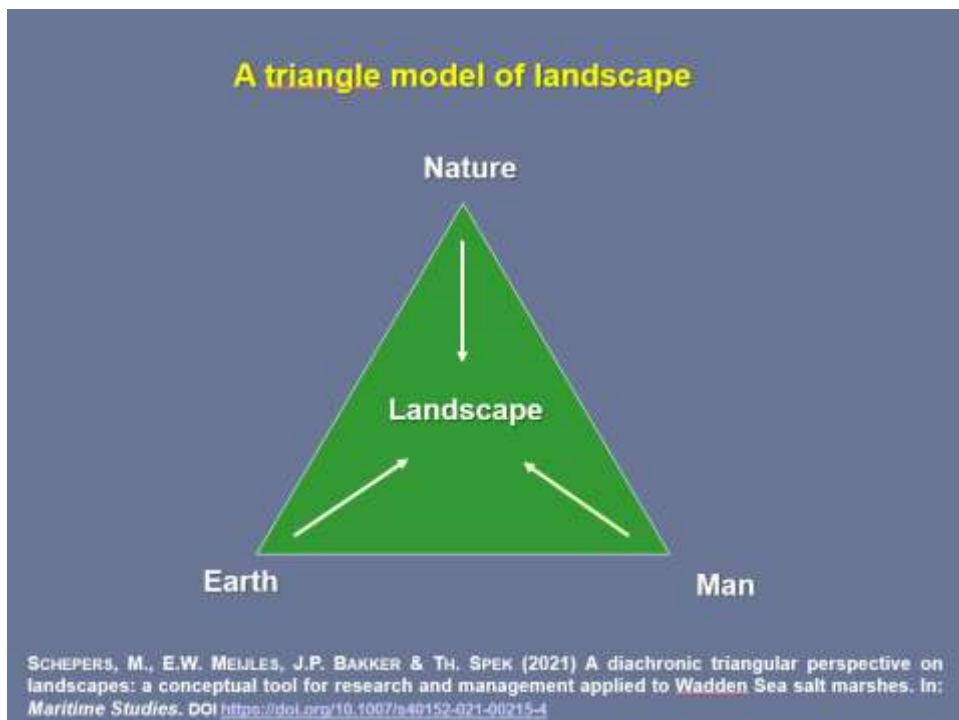


Fig. 6: A triangular model of landscape.

In the bottom left corner, you can see the element of earth. This includes geology, geomorphology (terrain), soil conditions, and the water system, collectively known as the 'abiotic system'. Each of these elements has its own specific field of study. The overarching field that studies the link between these different components is physical geography.

In the bottom right corner of the triangle you can see the human element. The impact of this anthropogenic component varies in both time and space. For example, every landscape or time era has its own political systems, economic developments, and cultural influences. Relevant fields for this element are, among others, archaeology, architectural history, and socio-economic history. Fields that attempt to integrate these various aspects are landscape archaeology and landscape history.

The third component of the landscape is nature, meaning the rich variety of plant and animal species in their interrelationship, bound together in a rich variety of ecosystems. Although many people also include the soil and water system in the concept of nature, this is actually not quite correct. The term nature can better be limited to everything that lives or has lived, in other words the biotic system. Clearly, nature is strongly dependent on both the earth and humans. That is why nature is so changeable and also vulnerable. The most integral field in this upper corner of the triangle is landscape ecology.

We can also express this triangle model in terms of landscape values: earth scientific values such as a healthy soil and a well-functioning water system appear in the bottom left corner. Cultural and historical values, or heritage values, appear in the bottom right corner. And nature values or sustainably functioning ecosystems appear in the upper corner. Anyone who works with landscape therefore always has to deal with a combination of values, and should ideally also see them in relation to each other.

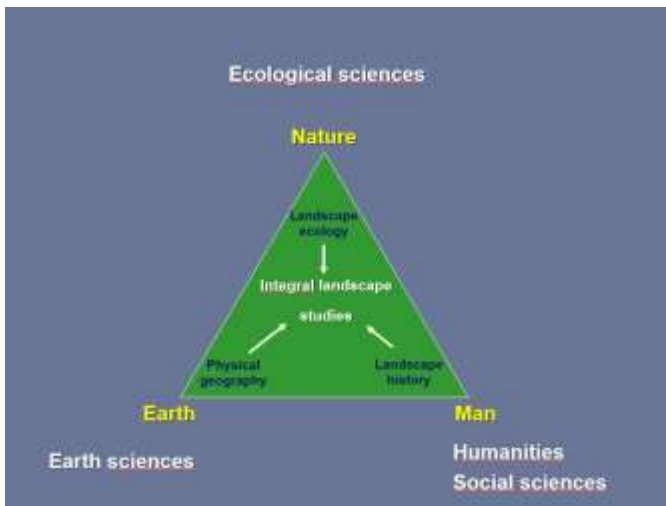


Fig. 7 Integration of scientific fields in the landscape domain



Fig. 8 Landscape values in the triangle model



Fig. 9 Longterm landscape development in the triangle model

The balance between these three components has undergone great changes throughout history. During the ice age, the landscape was primarily governed by the geological processes of ice, water, and wind. However, with the warmer and more humid climate of the Holocene, large parts of Europe became covered with deciduous forests and swamps, and the balance in the triangle therefore shifted to a space in the middle between earth and nature, on the left side of the triangle. This could be referred to as a largely 'natural landscape'.

With the rise of agriculture in the late prehistoric and historical period, the impact of humans on the landscape increasingly intensified. The balance gradually shifted to the middle of the triangle, meaning a kind of equilibrium between the earth, humans, and nature. This could be referred to as a 'semi-natural landscape' and later also a 'cultural landscape'. So we are on the right side of the triangle now.

Unfortunately, this balance in our landscapes has got completely out of hand in the past decades, which is why we can now say that we live in the Anthropocene. And because of this we have finally landed in the deep bottom right corner of the triangle, where the earth and nature have increasingly become victims of human activity.

However, all current discussions about a greener and more sustainable world are actually an attempt to move back towards the centre of the triangle. Hopefully, we will manage to join forces in the 21st century to recapture some of this former balance between the earth, humans, and nature. This requires from us, as experts, that we do more than simply focus on one of the three components of the landscape.

## 6. Conclusions

As we have seen above, there are many different ways of looking at landscape. The four concepts we listed all teach us something about our day-to-day work.

1. From the mediaeval landscape model we can learn that it is important in landscape management to be region-specific and human-inclusive. You should always consider what the regional characteristics of your national park are, which landscape types and landscape traits it includes, and how these values can be preserved in a recognizable form in future.
2. The landscape models also show that it is extremely important to actively involve inhabitants in these processes. They are the ones who have created the landscape through a process of many centuries, they feel connected to it, and they therefore deserve to be taken seriously when considering the future of their landscape.
3. The visual Renaissance concept of landscape teaches us that representation is crucial in the landscape world. But images are often incredibly subjective, manipulative, and leading. How often do we not see in the world of nature conservation that people are seduced by stunning images of an ecological paradise? Is that really what we want? Or can we create more realistic and balanced images of the landscape?
4. From the three-dimensional model of Maarten Jacobs, we can learn that perspectives on landscape are highly subjective and strongly linked to the individual or group concerned. Nature and landscape conservation is therefore, by definition, an arena of conflicts in which different perspectives on the same reality are being debated. Scientific truth is only one aspect of these discussions. We always must be fully aware of the multiplicity of landscape truths, which needs managers and people who are open to this.

The triangle model of earth, humans, and nature teaches us in the first place that in our work, we should never focus only on nature, or only on culture, or only on soil and water. The link between the three is the real core of our business. In managing national parks, we should therefore always



prioritize these broader landscape relations, in research and in policy, as well as in design and in management. Ask researchers to not only follow their specialization, but also to always explore the link with other aspects of the landscape. Don't just see yourself as an ecologist, but take great care with the underlying soil and water system, or the heritage that has grown in your park through the centuries, and that people feel a strong connection to. Maybe we should promote landscape research rather than nature research and landscape plans rather than nature plans, as the final objective should always be a broad, integral landscape approach.

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