



The Landscape Debate

Britain has some of the most varied and attractive landscapes in the world. You don't need to travel great distances to see both dramatic and subtle changes in our landscapes. From the wind-blown tundra of the Cairngorm summits to the rolling chalk downs of southern England; from the big-sky flatlands of East Anglia, via Pennine moorlands and limestone dales to the glacial carved mountains of Snowdonia, the Lake District and North West Scotland we are confronted by the ever changing scenery. This diversity results from a the kaleidoscope of British geology, with a succession of rocks from Pre-Cambrian to the present time, shaped by ice, wind and rain over millions of years. Humans have moulded changes from the earliest hunter gatherers to the demands of people in our post-industrial era. In this way, the landscapes we see today are a complex mixture of natural processes and layers of human occupation and culture.

What makes a landscape attractive? Looking out across the Menai Straits to Anglesey there is a view of the landscape that many will find appealing. In the foreground is a stretch of tidal water, a rocky shoreline backed by trees, with a white-washed cottage hugging the shore. Beyond this is a hillside with several irregular fields of pasture separated by hedgerows. Above, near the top of the hill is a medieval church with a spire, a dry stone wall and an ancient yew tree. Here, intricately connected are many of the landscape elements that people value and similar scenes throughout Britain are endorsed on postcards, calendars and chocolate boxes. These landscape preferences date back to the eighteenth century Romantic Movement and this perception of a rural idyll was later accentuated by the need to mentally escape from an overpowering industrialised and urbanised society.

But landscape is not static. It is clear that the British landscape has experienced constant change since the last Ice Age. With the slow warming of temperatures deciduous woodland spread across the land and there were also extensive areas of marsh and moorland. Neolithic and Bronze Age settlers introduced farming and small communities began to clear the forests. The continuing story of a growth in population, agricultural change, woodland clearance for sheep, enclosure, mining and industrialisation and the impact of rail and car travel are examples of the multitude of ways in which people have influenced changes to the British landscape throughout history.

Over the last 50 years we have witnessed more dramatic changes to our landscape wrought by the demands of an increasing population with greater mobility and the move towards ever larger systems of factory farming. Marion Shoard's, "Theft of the Countryside" written in 1980 is a classic account of the impact of agricultural change on the removal of hedgerows, wetlands and woods and straightening of river courses and the repercussions this has had for wildlife and peoples' enjoyment of the countryside. More recently, the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) published its "Going, Going, Gone" report in 2013 claiming that "the Government's growth

agenda is fuelling the number of applications for major developments in National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and locally valued landscapes".

This was reinforced in 2015 by the "Landscapes for Everyone" report supported by a consortium of organisations including outdoor bodies such as the BMC, the English Outdoor Council and the John Muir Trust that called for tighter planning restrictions to protect our cherished landscapes, their wildlife and measures to improve access for people to enjoy them. These two reports also raise issues within conservation. For example, what value do we place on a landscape for its aesthetic attraction and the personal associations we may have with it as opposed to its value for producing renewable energy through windfarms, solar installations or tidal barrages?

There is a growing debate over rewilding, reducing the impact of farming and intensive forestry on the landscape and managing change in a way that allows nature to play a greater role. This debate has been ignited by the journalist and environmentalist, George Monbiot who claims that some of our cherished landscapes are "sheepwrecked" and devoid of wildlife because of upland farming subsidies and overstocking of sheep and cattle. There are now experiments across Britain to rewild landscapes. One example is the Ennerdale Valley on the north-western edge of the Lake District National Park, where for the last decade with community involvement the landscape has been evolving more naturally. A partnership between landowners, the Forestry Commission, National Trust, United Utilities and Natural England has removed some of the spruce plantations, planted more native broadleaves, reduced sheep numbers and introduced Galloway cattle, reinstated wetland areas and created healthier habitats for riverfly, fish and butterflies. There is an urgent need to raise a debate on our countryside and the landscapes we want for the future. Answers are needed to basic questions: Who owns the land? How are decisions made that affect landscape change? Do we want landscapes that relate to an agreed perception of beauty? Or do we want landscapes for biodiversity, for recreation, to provide renewable energy or act as carbon sinks? These are difficult choices but debates we can influence through our work in the outdoors. ■

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