

Aesthetic Values and Protected Areas: A Story of Symbol Preservation

No place is a place until it has had a poet.

—Wallace Stegner

Stay on this good fire-mountain and spend the night among the stars. Watch their glorious bloom until the dawn, and get one more baptism of light. Then, with fresh heart, go down to your work, and whatever your fate, under whatever ignorance or knowledge you may afterward chance to suffer, you will remember these fine, wild views, and look back with joy to your wanderings in the blessed old Yellowstone Wonderland.

—John Muir

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.

—Aldo Leopold



There seems to be agreement that aesthetic factors have been of basic importance in the historical processes of land protection. These factors have had a decisive influence on the selection process itself and subsequently have oriented criteria for management. In the words of Múgica and De Lucio (1996: 229): “Among the traditional reasons for protecting natural areas, landscape features have undoubtedly played a major role. Landscape evokes deep emotions and strong attitudes towards conservation.” Perception-based criteria became so dominant during the initial stages of protection that, in many cases, aesthetic appreciation came to be considered equivalent to the existence of conservation-worthy values, so that places considered aesthetically unattractive were understood as valueless areas not worthy of protection (Múgica and De Lucio 1996). In some cases, even, the social pressure of aesthetics has become so strong as to be included in self-justifying destructive behavior. As Araújo (1996: 230) says, “Nature presents us with spectacles that we often deny ourselves when we cut out that which is natural, not without first devaluing the loss by minimizing the aesthetic value of what we see.”

Because of the importance assigned to them in many countries, aesthetic values have been reflected in federal laws and other legal instruments for the protection of nature, though their

influence has been reduced in more recent times. Spain, for instance, is an example of the chronological evolution of this phenomenon. It was one of the first countries to establish national

parks, with two areas legally declared by 1918. The specific law of 1916 defines national parks as “those exceptionally picturesque places or sites.” Similar words can be found in prominent positions in all the laws, orders, and decrees passed between 1920 and 1960. On the other hand, the 1975 law, the last one signed by General Francisco Franco, mentions the beauty of the landscapes in the last place of the list of reasons for declaring protected areas. Current legislation, the law of 1989, partially modified in 1997, endorses the establishment of a national park for each one of the country’s most representative ecosystems and defines national parks as “natural areas of high ecological and cultural value” that are designated as such because of “the beauty of their landscapes” and “the representativeness of their ecosystems.” Seemingly, aesthetics returns to the position of greatest importance, but the context is now different. Ecological representativeness is systematically considered in selecting and planning new areas.

At a global level, during the 1970s and 1980s, a certain conceptual confusion arises, even in countries where protected areas were first created, such as the United States. This is due to the coincidence of two factors: the great geographical expansion and increasing number of protected areas (and diverse processes of local adaptation) and the “ecologization” of scientific thought. The de-emphasis of aesthetics seems to derive from its supposed role in stimulating over-visitation to the areas. This is in contrast to the much stricter preservation theoretically guaranteed by the ecological approach. As Ackerman (1989: 40) noted with reference to America, “The national park idea has moved away

from its utilitarian, recreational beginnings, but its philosophical foundations remain shaky. If ... we seem to stray from the goals of naturalness and conservation of biological wholeness, it is because we are still torn by the two powerful and opposing drives of the Park Service mandate—to use and yet preserve.”

The Debate

Internationally, the supposedly more scientific criterion of representativeness seems to have prevailed. Protected areas are now selected and managed from an ecological point of view that assigns greatest value to protecting the biological diversity of regions or countries. No doubt this change could be interpreted from the standpoint of aesthetics, as a sort of “maturity” in which perception is modulated by a larger number of other factors and abstractions, including the awareness of belonging to a state. In any event, it is a fact that, thanks to the appreciation born from deeper knowledge, previously unappreciated landscapes, such as dunes, steppes, or scrubs, have become objects of protection under categories that consider both their value in ecosystem protection and their emotional connection with the observer. As Crespo (1992) verified, landscape perception parameters can be successfully used to contrast (and confirm) ecosystem evaluations based on ecological parameters.

Nevertheless, little by little, without explicitly giving up aesthetic considerations, the conservation objectives of protected area systems have focused primarily on representation of ecological diversity. Categories of protected areas have multiplied and diversified around the world, but, save for limited, older exceptions, they all tend to

focus on biological diversity and the relations between the components of such diversity. The human species is considered, in many cases, an integral part of the system, but always in an operational sense, and not as an external observer, capable of perceiving and of making decisions based on such perception.

In spite of the powerful influence that pure attraction continues to exert, there is great reluctance today to publicly defend the protection of an area on aesthetic grounds. As Kimber (1999: 68) puts it:

[T]hese expressions of value, emotion and delight do crop up occasionally in even the most sober and hard-headed gatherings, but they register as little more than road bumps. They lurk on the periphery of the discussion. The communal response is essentially, "Well, yes, that's all very nice but now let's get back to business." And business is the reductionist task of asking science to tell us how little land we need to set aside to preserve existing native species and communities.

This phenomenon has become evident enough for the World Commission for Protected Areas ([WCPA] 2001) to take it up and state in its Web site: "At the international level there has been a reluctance to make explicit, and promote the management of protected areas for, non-material values. This is due, perhaps, to growing globalization of the western way of looking at the world that attaches singular importance to the scientific and technical, at the expense of the human, cultural, and spiritual."

Conscious efforts continue, nevertheless, to reverse this trend and vindicate

the real importance of the far-reaching values of landscape. Again, Kimber (1999: 68) shares this point of view in an illustrative way when he says, "[M]y sense is that what matters far more than any wonder drug science may yet discover in the jungles of Borneo are those aesthetic and spiritual values we choose to exclude from public debate." On the other hand, expert voices endure in the realms of artistic analysis that continue to advocate an aesthetic approach to natural areas. Such is the case of Alonso (1988: 8) when she says:

We recognize the limits of perception, but the fact that it has limits does not mean that it is not the best tool we have available. We are well qualified to correctly perceive structural and formal relations, and even to know intuitively and to find the underlying order in the seeming chaos of natural forms. Consequently, I have considered cultivating perception, and basing the study of characters upon it, an adequate approach, and a correct starting point, to take on the study of natural areas.

What, then, is happening? Why have aesthetic values moved from primary to marginal importance, and then back toward primary importance once again? What does it mean today to speak of aesthetic values, to use them in connection with protected areas to which society entrusts more and more complex functions, increasingly linked to bioregional planning? In what follows, we intend to approach these questions, starting from a geohistoric review of the concept of landscape aesthetics and its connections to protected area theory.

The Beginnings

It appears reasonable to suppose that the earliest form of conscious perception of a given portion of territory (thus for the first time turned into “landscape”) was probably built on the abstraction born from shared knowledge of different environments with their differing climatic, geomorphological, and ecological elements. Such knowledge would have been very important to the everyday survival of a still-nomadic human group in an unpredictable environment. Bernáldez (1981: vii) expresses it this way:

Man and his predecessors have been immersed for thousands of years in the flow of information which landscape is. We should not wonder at the presence of numerous adaptive responses. Among them, the emotional, sentimental aspects of landscape should be recognized. Are we aware of the importance of the reactions we call “aesthetic,” of their adaptive background, of the role they played in survival?

Arsuaga (1999) is probably also right when he links the origin of such emotional responses to the enormous analytical capacity of the human brain and to the subsequent “humanization” of elements of the environment and of the relations between them, which was already present in prehistoric times. The permanent attention to the movements, facial expressions, and other signals coming from the other members of human society probably resulted in abstractions that led to the assignment of “personalities,” of souls, to elements of nature. Geomorphic and topographical characteristics and atmospheric dynamics

were interpreted to have human qualities. High cliffs and storm clouds started sending out the same menacing message as a person standing up straight, arms in the air, while the calm mouths of rivers spoke of loving welcome and pleasure. This peculiar way of treating nonhuman entities as human, and involving them in stories, served as a useful mechanism to understand natural phenomena but also, and above all, as a vehicle to create active sets, perceived systems, geographies, and landscapes. Mountains and other formations (frequently, and not by chance, protected) that bear names of human characters are still plentiful today.

Certain kinds and combinations of these mental constructs were especially effective in giving impressions of safety, abundance, or well-being. They began to be transmitted and embellished through generations, and they turned into cultural artifacts, evocative myths. And once primal needs were satisfied, the impulse continued to protect those areas that exhibited these qualities symbolic of welfare. At the same time, of course, other combinations that transmitted impressions of sterility, helplessness, or aggression were consolidated as inhospitable landscapes from which it was wise to stay away. This kind of process must have happened in similar ways in different bioclimatic zones of the world, giving birth to the different aesthetic conceptions that would much later confront each other. Consequently, these twin perceptual processes, generated in different territories by human communities adapted to them, would have resulted in equivalent but divergent systems of values. These value systems were then reflected in the criteria used for the identification

and prioritization of protected areas.

The inclination to protect certain kinds of areas would thus be a result of the building of the concept of landscape itself. Throughout modern and contemporary history, this inclination has resulted in the protection of less subtle landscapes that are readily appreciated, such as mountain areas with plentiful vegetation and different varieties of still and running water (Figure 1), that respond to what has been called the “Alpine Model” (Múgica and De Lucio 1996). This line of thought has been called the “eco-ethological theory of landscape aesthetics” by Bernáldez (1981: 246), with the statement that “aesthetic preferences for (or rejection of) certain landscapes appear to be instinctive reactions to the symbolic character of certain elements of the scene.”

Obviously, the idea itself of symbol-

ic character can vary according to each individual or collective “user” of the landscape and hence evolve over time with divergent results. Thus, today’s research on the aesthetic preferences of visitors to protected areas confirms that the degree of direct experience and intellectual knowledge of an area clearly influences the appreciation of its aesthetic values. De Lucio and Múgica (1994: 156) arrived at the empirical conclusion that “visitors to the national parks also differ in their landscape preferences depending on their attitudes and environmental behaviour. The more casual and generalist visitors more often choose the prototype landscape, rejecting those of the parks that have other characteristics. Certain more specialised groups tend to choose more often the landscape of the park that they are in, such as wild challenging landscapes. The



Figure 1. The “Alpine Model”: easily decipherable landscapes have been a frequent object of protection in modern history. Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area, Tennessee. *National Park Service photo.*

subjects with more experience of the park also choose landscapes with a lower degree of legibility.”

The Early and Middle Ages

The psychological process underlying the origin of aesthetics seems to be initially connected to the phenomenon of religious experience. The first unmistakably funerary behaviors discovered by current archaeology (Arsuaga 1999) are connected to the careful choosing of a place. Later on, the great civilizations of antiquity (e.g., the Mayas in Tikal; the Aztecs in Tenochtitlán; the Quechuas, or Incas, in Machu Picchu; or the Egyptians in the Valley of the Kings) repeatedly revealed the linkage between the establishment of important religious centers and the perception and appreciation of “promising” landscapes. In the origin itself of Western civilization, the Acropolis of Athens embodies the paradigm of synergy between topographic site and human action to establish a sense of place, of identification, over time creating the need for preservation and protection. Bloomer and Moore (1979: 120) recognize it in their analysis, when they state, “Among all places in the world, this is with no doubt the one that makes any western man tremble the most.... Let us begin saying that the site itself is magnificent to start with.... The buildings of the Acropolis continue to serve as models of exquisite care.”

This synergy of place, siting, and architecture was passed down to the Middle Ages in Europe, but greater importance was progressively acquired by the architectural component, which, from a Christian point of view, is justified because the human being is seen as God’s obedient agent. Sacred buildings were also uncon-

sciously, but carefully, separated from their theoretically optimum locations to avoid trampling on (and competing with) places that were frequently sacred (i.e., geomorphologically, hence aesthetically powerful) in ancient pagan traditions. Temples would then serve as specific instruments of their day. Placed within a time frame that surpassed them, they would act as dissuasive peripheral attractors, comparable in this sense to present-day protected area visitor centers. In some coastal regions of western Europe, for example, a sort of proportion can be detected between the physical and artistic magnitude of the churches, and the ancestral “importance” of the cape landforms as sacred sites, which inspired people with awe based on the force of sea and wind against the rocks. The paradigmatic example is the cathedral of Saint James, in Compostela, Spain, the westernmost goal for millions of European pilgrims throughout the centuries in spite of its not being located exactly on the Cape of Fisterra (literally, “the end of the world”), but somewhat withdrawn, at a distance from it, which is also a sign of its more than geographical value. In any case, what greater protection for a site can be found than that emanating from the concentrated presence of God in it?

Modern Times

Nevertheless, the clearest reference to the “higher powers” is paradoxically furnished at the turning point when medieval theocracy is left behind, and the Modern Age is consolidated. Again, Bernáldez (1981: 181) illustrates this accurately when he states that “the awe, the mixture of terror and exultation, that was previously reserved for God, was transferred dur-

ing the seventeenth century to a wider cosmos ... and to its great objects: mountains, oceans, deserts. The aesthetics of Infinity was founded by travelers who felt amazed, but at the same time captivated, by infinite space.”

The age of the great European explorations and colonization began. The expeditions took place largely because of their value in geopolitical terms where the acquisition of large virgin territories served as testimonies to the power of the State. Nevertheless, the scientific component (and through it the aesthetic questions that filtered into the intellectual discourse) played a remarkable role during this period of expansion. This happened, for instance, through the influence of figures as outstanding as Alexander von Humboldt, author and spreader of the concept of the “scenes of Nature.” In a farewell letter written before leaving for his famous journey and quoted, among others, by Botting (1995: 57), Humboldt confesses his great philosophical (and aesthetical) goal: “I will collect plants and fossils, and will carry out astronomical observations. But this is not the main objective of my expedition. I will try to discover how the forces of Nature interact among each other, and how the geographic environment influences animal and plant life. In other words, I shall search for the unity of Nature.”

The end result of this fundamentally transformative expansion was the generally violent meeting of civilizations, of cultures, and of aesthetics. The tug-of-war began that later affected something as crucial as the selection of the lands to be preserved (or to be kept protected as they were by the first residents); in other words, the fight to get symbols of one’s own tradition included in the small final set

considered worthy of preservation as shared heritage. Even though the initial encounters between civilizations took place in a wide range of settings, over time colonization focused basically on places that confirm the validity of the eco-ethological theory of landscape aesthetics—that is, familiar environments. An accurate description of the process is offered by Crosby (1988: 3–7): “European emigrants and their descendants are all over the place.... They also compose the great majority in the populations of what I shall call the Neo-Europes.... But what was the nature of the Neo-European pull? The attractions were many, of course.... But underlying them all ... were factors perhaps best described as biogeographical.”

The so-called Neo-Europes are geographically scattered but occupy similar latitudes. They therefore enjoy similar, basically temperate, climates and offer opportunities for the existence of vicarious species and ecosystems, and hence the development of twin “families” of observed landscapes. Obvious cases appear, for example, through comparison of Norway, Germany, or Spain with the corresponding regions of Chile or New Zealand. Consequently, destinations chosen for reasons of landscape similarity regenerate the same kind of emotional links to the sites, the same kind of what has been called “sense of place,” and hence parallel paths in natural area preservation concepts. European expansion strongly modified and unified people’s territorial perception, and preservation priorities, all over the world. This line of protection lasted as long as the nineteenth-century concepts of state and international relations held. The process of general review of Western

precepts initiated after World War II, and which deepened from the 1960s on, has also influenced the selection and management of protected areas. A shift took place, which was in tune with what the new society demanded from protected areas, and the need to assert new values. Actually, it has always been that way, both in the periods during which aesthetic reasons were embedded in other arguments and in those when they have prevailed explicitly. This is clearly perceived by Smith (2000: 233) in his historical review of developments in the United States, when he observes that

parks are also one of the most honest reflections of our culture ... of what each generation of Americans has considered important. As sites are added to the system, as chaotic and unpredictable as the process may seem, they are reflections of the people's will, an indication of what the majority considers significant at the moment of the park's establishment.... Our natural parks were primarily established for reasons that cannot be considered ecological. Everglades ... was our first national park that did not contain the tallest trees, the deepest canyons, the highest waterfalls.... This tendency has been characterized by environmental historian Alfred Runte (1982) as 'monumentalism,' putting extraordinary displays of nature inside national park boundaries. These boundaries were almost never designed to follow ecological or topographical features.... Significant components, then, that were absolutely critical to the environments in which these features existed, were left outside the park.

Smith's discourse reflects the rational, scientific argument dominant

in the 1980s. It was then a widespread opinion, even though, in many parts of the world, it still coexisted with a strong consideration of scenic beauty as a criterion for selecting protected areas. At the international level, the importance of both perspectives was clarified and balanced by the establishment of a standard set of definitions for comparable categories of protected areas, and the later fine-tuning of these (IUCN 1994), in correspondence with management objectives. The functional focus of territories is thus stressed, all of which is consistent with the modern aesthetic trend of eclectic but harmonious integration.

Too little time has gone by for the eco-ethological principle to have changed radically. What has changed are the elements of landscape and the reality they symbolize. Aesthetic preferences operate today as they did during the Stone Age, but now they relate to much more sophisticated objects. Thus, the messages of security or comfort, those that can produce aesthetic pleasure, include institutional components, as well as other complex abstractions. And this modern complexity is, of course, applicable to the selection, planning, and management of protected areas as well. Modern societies demand reciprocal linkages between their protected areas and the regions of which they are a part. These linkages facilitate effective and participative management, local inputs into regional planning, and transboundary cooperation. In short, societies today seek protected areas that serve as an important input toward sustainability that ensures both services and values, not only in terms of a continuous stream of material benefits, but also in terms of local pride, and identification with the region. Actually, integrative

sustainability, as an exponent of ecological and social health, is today the ultimate object of protection.

In terms of regional planning, this implies the preservation of untouched core areas around which gradients of human presence are established, interconnected by corridors, the whole matrix being managed with conservation-consistent criteria. Under this concept, protected area systems can be designed to surpass mere ecological representativeness and take into account other properties such as adaptability and connectivity. Awe, onomatopoeic awe, continues to influence our relationship with the core areas, but the sensation of functional health around them, linked with the protection of ecosystem processes, can also be interpreted in new aesthetic terms. The mutual protection agreement between people and landscape is being re-edited in a wider context. As Araújo says (1996: 249), "If Nature has nourished Culture, the time seems to have come for reciprocity, for Culture to begin nourishing Nature: that is the essence of ecological thought."

The signals sent out by the different cultural sources contribute to the new definition of the symbols to be preserved. This new definition corresponds to a landscape understood wholly, as an integration of stage, scenery, and resource. It is not easy to reach an agreement on this definition, but new proposals are beginning to be articulated, with ideas capable of bringing together both scientific and emotional inputs. According to Kimber (1999: 69), "The questions we need to ask are not just how much land do we need ... to preserve representative biotic communities, but how much do we need to leave alone ... if

we want to keep imagination alive, if we want to remain fully human." Perhaps, then, one of the important principles on which the agreement for the new protection should be built is recognition of the integral nature of the realities to be managed. Aesthetics, once identified with areas locked up under a glass bell, pleads today to escape through the cracks. Here, too, there is design: Beauty results from optimizing use (including its absence, when fitting). The urgent need to generalize this perspective is acutely pointed out by Berger (1999: 112): "Yellowstone is a British Museum of natural anomalies. The Tetons are composed as *The Last Supper*. The Grand Canyon is water's consummate sculpture. Our parks provide essentially a ceremonial experience, through which an informed public passes properly awed, and exiled from its own feelings. Park custodians have the same weakness as the rest of us: they love to name, to isolate, to point out, and to enshrine."

The proper common ground, then, for a balanced approach is that of an enriched sense of place, the concept capable of linking aesthetics, culture, peace, and survival through sustainable protection of natural areas. In the words of Lewis (1996: 21, 24, 27): "Identifying and protecting critical natural and cultural resources is the crux ... to [sic] sustainability. These resources are not only the basis of our life-support system and our economic well-being, but are also the basis for quality of life, sense of place, diversity, and options of choice.... Too often ... survival is not regarded as dependent on the land remaining intact, both ecologically and aesthetically."

Finally, none of this can be achieved without social understand-

ing and participation. It is people who have defined the role of aesthetics in landscape protection since the beginning, and this will be even more the case in the future. As Rollins (1993:1, 3) puts it:

Residents of a community have thoughts and ideas about what makes their surroundings and community visually important and attractive.... Citizens should be asked to prioritize each visual resource they identify. This will help in identifying sites; [and in] establish[ing] a ranking or priority list ... of special or distinctive views—[namely,] those that char-

acteristically contribute to the visual quality of the community and area and provide a sense of place and image.

Human beings will continue to evolve together with the landscape they inhabit, use, modify, and admire. We will continue to respond to the symbolic power of scenic elements, whatever those happen to be at any given time. Protecting areas today, and tomorrow, will mean ensuring the continuity of what is essential, materially and emotionally, in that relationship. It will always be a story of preserving the sense of place.

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