

## PERCEIVING RURAL LANDSCAPES IN FILM AND PHOTOGRAPHY – EXPERIENCES FROM A PARTICIPATIVE PLANNING APPROACH IN THE UPPER AUSTRIAN LEADER REGION MÜHLVIERTLER KERNLAND

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### Summary

In addition to the natural-physical aspects of landscape, the public perception of landscapes is of central importance for a comprehensive understanding of landscape. This paper reflects different landscape perceptions on the basis of a photo competition and school workshops. These were conducted in the VITAL LANDSCAPES project as part of a regional participation process in the Upper Austrian LEADER region Mühlviertler Kernland. The authors analysed the photos submitted in the regional photo competition as well as the short films produced by secondary and vocational school students with regard to how the participants perceive the landscapes they inhabit. This paper argues that human-nature relations form an intrinsic part of the regional landscape perception and that depictions of local/regional landscape particularities contribute to forming personal and collective identities.

### Keywords

landscape development • landscape perception • landscape identity • film • photography

### 1. Introduction

According to the European Landscape Convention (ELC), the term landscape “means an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors” (CoE 2000, Art. 1). This definition embraces both the natural-physical as well as the cognitive dimension of landscape and emphasises the relevance of landscape perception for a comprehensive understanding of landscape.

The ELC landscape definition is a key reference for studies aiming to grasp the full scope of landscape qualities. It allows researchers to investigate not just the ecological or economic functions of landscapes but also their socio-cultural value, e.g. in terms of recreation, well-being or identification and belonging [Meier et al. 2010, Lanninger and Langarová 2010].

A comprehensive understanding of the term “landscape” also marked the starting-point for the Central European research project VITAL LANDSCAPES [see Těšitel et al. 2013 for a project overview]. In the course of the project, the Austrian partners implemented a participatory planning process in the Upper Austrian LEADER region Mühlviertler Kernland. The process aimed at involving local/regional inhabitants in the effort of landscape visioning [Stöglehner et al. 2013] and at assessing the public perception of landscape. The participation process in the Austrian pilot region comprised three main activities consisting of:

- a total of eight landscape dialogues in four parts of the pilot region,
- school workshops in two secondary schools in the district capital,
- a regional photo competition.

The landscape dialogues involved local inhabitants, decision-makers and stakeholders in a process of landscape visioning. They offered participants the opportunity to discuss current challenges to local landscape development and draft landscape quality objectives as part of a normative framework for future landscape developments in the municipalities of the pilot region. Within this collective learning process, participants exhibited a high degree of self-organisation and ownership by establishing a common value-base or understanding of landscape or by adopting workshop techniques and elaborating process outcomes in the form of landscape quality objectives [Löschner et al. 2013, Stöglehner et al. 2013].

While the landscape dialogues provide insights regarding communicative and participatory planning in practice, the other two main regional activities – the school workshops and the photo competition – may help to understand how people perceive and portray the landscapes they inhabit on film/photo. Towards this end, the authors begin by analysing the landscape types and elements portrayed in the short films and photographs. They subsequently discuss what the landscape images (may) reveal about the public understanding of landscape development. On the basis of the presented findings, this paper concludes by reflecting applied methods of landscape perception within the wider participatory framework implemented in the pilot region.

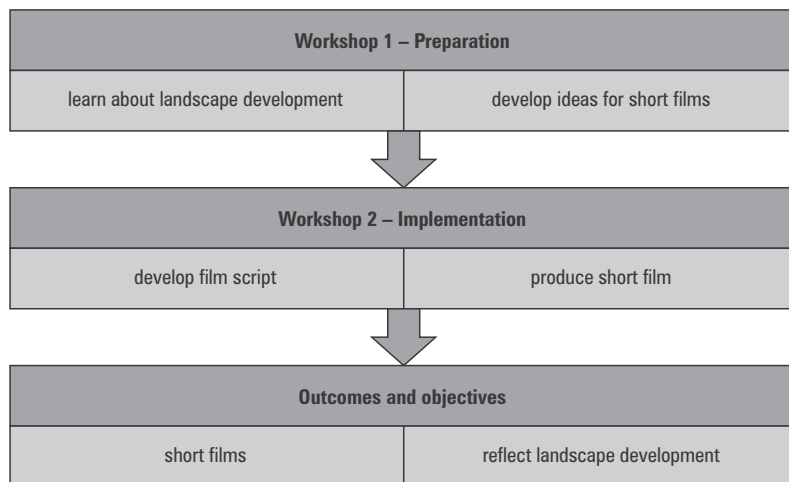
## 2. Materials and methods

In the course of the regional participation process, the VITAL LANDSCAPES project team organised school workshops with secondary and vocational school students of the Commercial Academy (HAK) and the Agricultural Technical School (LFS) in the district capital Freistadt. In this way, sixteen to seventeen year-olds could be involved in the regional discourse about landscapes. The pupils were asked to implement the general theme of landscape in a one- to three-minute short film by addressing related questions such as:

- “How do global trends affect landscape development in the pilot region?”
- “Which demands and requirements must landscapes fulfil in the pilot region?”

- “How do/can landscapes contribute to a high quality of life in the pilot region?”

The school workshops (see Figure 1) aimed at critically reflecting the current state of local and regional landscapes. Furthermore, the pupils were encouraged to develop visions as well as quality objectives of future landscapes. A film script had to be written by the pupils and implemented in a short film using either a customary mobile phone camera or professional equipment provided by the HAK. In the HAK, the films were part of regular teaching in the course Multimedia & Webdesign. The LFS-films were produced during spare time but could be used for the final school project.



Source: Stöglehner et al. 2013

**Fig. 1.** Process scheme of the school workshops

In Workshop 1, the pupils were acquainted with the research project VITAL LANDSCAPES and engaged in a creative brainstorming about landscape issues. Assisted by a member of the dorftV-station<sup>1</sup>, the pupils were also able to make their first attempts at filming. In Workshop 2, the preliminary film ideas were analyzed in detail and then translated into film scripts for the short films on “landscape” which were then independently produced by the pupils.

The photo competition “Sichtweisen auf das Kernland” (“Perspectives of the Kernland”) was held in May 2012, in cooperation with the regional newspaper Bezirksrundschau Freistadt and the LEADER region Mühlviertler Kernland and sponsored by a local electrical retailer. Participants of the photo competition had the

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dorftv.at/>

opportunity to submit personal landscape impressions with the following thematic focuses:

- “The most beautiful landscape in the Mühlviertler Kernland”
- “To me, an intact landscape looks like...”
- “The landscapes of the Mühlviertler Kernland are under distress because of...”
- “Landscape is subject to change”
- “My favourite spot – this is where I like to be”

The website of the regional newspaper<sup>2</sup> served as a platform for the photo competition which allowed all registered users to upload photos and participate in the public voting. A five-person jury – consisting of a representative of one of the partner schools, the regional newspaper, the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences as well as the pilot region – selected the award-winning photos (see Figure 2) from the pool of 180, which had been photos submitted by a total of ninety participants.

The photos and the films delivered throughout these actions were analysed by the authors according to the following criteria:

- qualitative aspects such as context of the picture, landscape patterns shown or activities carried out in landscape,
- quantitative aspects such as the number of certain landscape elements or general landscape motifs.

The criteria were interpreted in the light of the results of the landscape dialogues, among others, whether the discussions in the landscape dialogues and the results support or contradict each other.

### 3. Results

The photos submitted in the photo competition reflect the large variety of landscapes to be encountered in the Mühlviertler Kernland region. Below is a selection depicting the award-winning photos, which offers a general impression of some of the landscape types of the pilot region (see Figure 2).

Photos no. 1, 2, and 4 show highly structured and densely wooded hilly landscapes. As images of these landscape types were repeatedly submitted throughout the competition, it appears that they have a high recognition value for the regional populace. Photos no. 3 and 5 depict the river Feldaist which traverses the pilot region from north to south. With almost one in ten submissions directly referring to this stretch of water, it apparently marks a key landscape reference for many participants of the photo competition. Finally, photo no. 6 shows the regionally well-known chapel on Kalvarienberg. As one of many submissions of heritage sites, it indicates a strong relevance of cultural and historical elements for the perception of landscapes.



<sup>2</sup> [www.bezirksrundschau.com/sichtweisen](http://www.bezirksrundschau.com/sichtweisen)



Source (from left to right): Photo 1 – Barbara Schauer; Photo 2 – Richard Schramm; Photo 3 – Gertraud Gutenbrunner; Photo 4 – Irene Höller; Photo 5 – Roger Jagersberger; Photo 6 – Herbert Prieschl

Fig. 2. Award-winning photos of the photo competition “Perspectives of the Kernland”

The short films produced as part of the school workshops likewise show a wide range of landscape types (see Figure 3).

	Film No. 1 is intended as a <b>promotional video for the Mühlviertler Kernland</b> and emphasizes the region's strengths and assets, such as in the field of education. The film makers present an interior perspective of their region and demonstrate a high level of satisfaction with the current state of the region's natural and cultural landscape.
	Film No. 2 is a <b>music video for the song's Paradies by the singer-songwriter "Beda mit der Palme"</b> and accentuates the region's distinctiveness. The entire song is sung in regional dialect, the cultural landscapes typical to the Mühlviertel serve as settings throughout the music video. This short film demonstrates the fundamental role of landscapes towards forming regional identities and strengthening rural communities.
	Film No. 3 deals with <b>regional processing and marketing of agricultural products</b> . It traces a series of agricultural products (e.g. eggs, milk, vegetables) from their origin to their direct marketing in a farmers' shop in Freistadt. The film argues that the Mühlviertler Kernland offers "optimal conditions" for organic farming and portrays landscapes as a significant part of regional production and value-added cycles.
	Film No. 4 shows pupils performing <b>sports and leisure activities in the landscape</b> (e.g. mountain biking, slacklining), thus presenting the large landscape variety within the region. In the final caption the film makers ask "What does landscape mean to you?" implying that they presented their subjective impressions of landscapes and acknowledge the broad scope of landscape readings.
	Film No. 5 focuses on the growing importance of landscape for the <b>production of renewable energy</b> . The film makers show different forms of energy production from renewable raw materials and wind power. The final caption "Think ahead, don't burn everything for fuel", places the film in the context of the ongoing controversy about 'food vs. fuels'.

Source: Stöglehner et al. 2013

Fig. 3. Screenshots and summaries of the short films

With its focus on regional assets (e.g. educational institutions, heritage sites) the first film emphasises the “built” landscapes of the pilot region. On the other hand, the second film frames the highly-structured cultivated landscapes characteristic of

the Mühlviertel region. The third film traces regional agricultural processing cycles via changes in landscape types, from cultivated landscapes (production) to townscapes (consumption). In the fourth film, students present various leisure landscapes. Finally, the last film depicts “new types of landscape” [Bosch and Peyke 2011] which emerge in the production of renewable energies.

#### 4. Discussion

The broad range of landscapes “captured” on film and photo allowed the project team to draw a number of conclusions with regard to how the inhabitants of the Mühlviertler Kernland Region perceived “their” landscape.

The photo competition and the school workshops demonstrate that the participants’ understanding of landscape goes well beyond the natural environment. Both activities made apparent that the *social and human interactions* as well as the economic activities taking place in the landscape are regarded as key components of landscape development. In particular, the short films placed human-nature relations at the centre of their landscape understanding, as becomes most apparent in the film about regional processing cycles (film no. 3). The film on recreational aspects of landscapes (film no. 4) as well as the one about renewable energies (film no. 5) implicitly discuss shifting societal demands and their impacts on landscape.

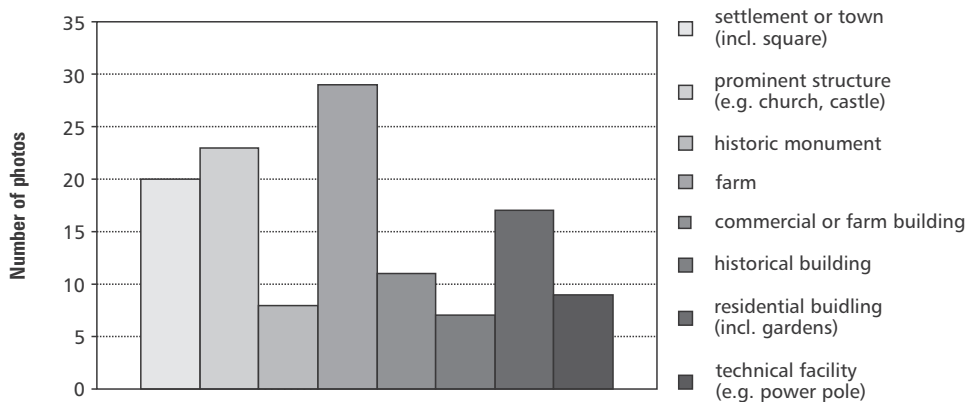
The analysis of the submitted photo motifs equally showed a particularly strong appreciation for landscapes which emerged and were transformed through cultivation. These structurally rich cultural landscapes with their characteristic interplay of open agricultural land, forests and scattered landscape elements appear to represent an ideal landscape to many inhabitants. These landscapes are of great aesthetic and ecological value due to their variety and complexity. However, they also represent the economic and resource base for many different land uses.

Secondly, the photographs and the short films indicate that (even in the predominantly rural pilot region) the *built environment* is an integral part of public landscape perception. In the photo competition, approximately forty percent of all submitted photos include built structures (see Figure 4), such as farm houses, town squares or historic monuments (i.e. buildings of cultural or historical significance).

It is noteworthy, that modern residential buildings were only sporadically portrayed in the submitted photos. Their (deliberate) “dis-regard” is remarkable as this indicates that these types of buildings are alien to the public landscape understanding and that they are not part of (ideal) conceptions of landscape. This interpretation is supported by findings from the landscape dialogues. The participants named newly-erected settlements on the fringes or outside the towns and villages as one of the main challenges for current and future landscape development in the pilot region [Löschner et al. 2012, Löschner et al. 2013].

In the school workshops and the short films produced by the pupils the “built environment” had an equally strong albeit somewhat different relevance, in the perception of (rural) landscapes. While every short film includes at least one reference to “built”

landscapes, these are not confined to the above-cited examples of historical farmhouses, heritage sites or renewable energy plants. Several short films explicitly show modern residential buildings and settlements as part of the regional landscapes; film no. 4 even includes the backyard of a single-family home in its compendium of recreational landscapes. The reasons for the more widespread representation of “residential landscapes” in the pupils’ short films can, however, only be speculated upon.



Source: Stöglehner et al. 2013

Fig. 4. Overview of the building types in the submitted landscape photos

Landscapes are, accordingly, found to play a strong role in building *local and regional identities* for the participants of the photo competition and the school workshops. Beyond providing for a wide range of primary functions (e.g. the production of agricultural products or renewable energy), the landscapes portrayed in the photos and on film clearly fulfil key human wants, namely the need for belonging and well-being. The latter becomes rather apparent in the photo competition as participants overwhelmingly submitted photos in the categories “intact landscape” and “favourite spots” rather than “landscape is subject to change” or “landscape is under distress”. This bias might be explained by the fact that the photos were submitted as part of a competition where representations of “intact” landscapes may in general be considered to be more aesthetic and of higher quality than ones of “distressed” landscapes. Nonetheless, the vast majority of photos with “positive” landscape connotations clearly reflects a high level of satisfaction and quality of life as perceived by the inhabitants of the pilot region. This conclusion is supported by findings from the landscape dialogues in which participants closely correlated their quality of life with the quality (i.e. vitality) of the landscapes they inhabit [Löschner et al. 2012, Löschner et al. 2013].

In depicting various socio-cultural functions of landscape, the short films also offer insights with regard to the role landscapes play in building identities and fulfill-



ing the human need of belonging. The music clip (see film no. 2) for the song about the Mühlviertel region, for instance, explicitly focuses on regional landscape characteristics, such as the gentle-hilly and structurally-rich cultivated landscapes. The particularity of the region is further accentuated by the lyrics which – performed in the regional dialect (“Mühlviertlerisch”) – add a rich “linguistic component” to regional landscape identities.

As the Mühlviertel region is widely considered as “structurally weak”, “predominantly agrarian” and “conservative” (see film no. 1), the regional identity is forged by juxtaposing the inside and outside views of the region. This becomes particularly evident in the first film which counters the above-mentioned clichés with images of regional assets (e.g. modern power plants or higher learning institutions). Film no. 2, on the other hand, does not try to paint a different picture of the region; it decidedly turns around the common discourse on central/peripheral regions by emphasizing the (landscape) particularities of the Mühlviertel region and places the city of Linz in the periphery of the Mühlviertel.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper discussed what photographs (submitted in a photo competition) and short film clips (produced by secondary school students) may reveal about the public perception of landscape in the Austrian pilot region of the VITAL LANDSCAPES project. The authors argued that the landscape motifs captured on photo/film reflect a broad understanding of landscape which (1) builds on intense human-nature relations, (2) goes well beyond natural-physical landscapes to include “built” landscape elements, and (3) acknowledges the strong role of landscape in shaping personal and regional identities.

It can be stated that the discussions in the landscape dialogues (which comprised an analysis of the status quo of the regional landscape, the respective visions and measures for landscape development) and the results of the analysis of the photo competition and the films support each other. For example, the abstract landscape quality objective of protecting small-structured cultural landscapes formulated by the people [Löschner et al. 2013] could be visualised by the pictures submitted in the photo competition which show images of what is perceived to be a small-structured cultural landscape. Pictures submitted by the public can, therefore, support participatory discussions about visions and measures for future landscape development.

The different types of activities carried out in the VITAL LANDSCAPES participatory planning process not only allowed the project team to relate and contrast project findings; it also proved to be beneficial in terms of mobilising different target groups. As the participants of the landscape dialogues consisted mainly of elderly men, the school workshops explicitly aimed at giving adolescents a say in the process of landscape participation and visioning [Stöglehner et al. 2013]. The opening of the photo competition to the general public proved to be a powerful instrument for mobilising a wide range of target groups. The authors, therefore, conclude that photo



competitions and film workshops can be a powerful and useful tool to start local or regional development processes in order to ensure a high level of participation throughout the process.

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