

Local residents' sense of place, recreational use and perceptions of rural landscape

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Rural landscape is in the midst of change derived from the transition in the livelihood systems, such as agriculture, forestry and fisheries, urban settlement, energy production and delivery, as well as land abandonment. The rural landscape change challenges the landscape perceptions of rural dwellers, part-time-residents and the potential newcomers, who might have different expectations about what the rural landscape should be like and what it should be used for. This is the case especially in rural areas around urban sprawl, where the differences in perceptions provide a breeding ground for landscape conflicts (Walker & Ryan 2008, Buciega et al. 2009).

To understand and to solve the possible conflicts in landscape management, it is useful to acknowledge the differences in the strength and quality of sense of place various people address to same place. Many researchers have pointed out how sense of place varies between various socio-economic and socio-cultural groups, such as country-dwellers, farmers, experts and visitors (e.g. Stedman 2006). The everyday activities, close-to-home recreation and personal experiences are important in the formation of sense of place and landscape perceptions (Davenport & Anderson 2005). Several researchers have suggested that sense of place leads to the care of place and harmony with people and nature and enhances the aesthetic quality of the landscape (Kaltenborn 1998, Birkeland 2008). Yet, there is less empirical research on identifying exactly what the links are between the sense of place and landscape perceptions. Therefore this study, using a survey data, examines the variation of senses of place and landscape perceptions across the various social groups in the case study area of Lepsämä, a rural landscape located close to Helsinki Metropolitan area.

The first objective of the paper is to examine the local residents' sense of place with regard to the region in which they are living. Measures of sense of place were used to identify if clusters exist with respect to them. The second objective is to analyse the association of the sense of place clusters with the landscape perceptions, including both the existing landscape elements and the landscape changes.

The results of the study showed that there existed four clusters of residents based on their sense of place. The first cluster, 'socially connected', had moved into the region from an urban environment. They were highly educated men who missed their childhood landscape elements and/or wished to have different kinds of elements in the landscape. Yet, they appreciated the traditional agricultural landscape elements. They used the area frequently for recreation and wished to have more recreation paths in the region, even though many of them owned land. They appreciated the region as a safe rural environment, but felt that the region was changing. The second group, 'contradictory ties', had also moved in the region from urban environment. They were mostly highly educated women and valued the landscape highly, although they did not see the landscape as perfect. They felt that there were many other landscapes just as important and did not feel like they lived in a unique place. They used the region quite actively for recreation.

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They thought highly of the regions traditional agricultural landscape elements, but did not want the changes brought to the landscape by intensive agriculture or businesses. The third cluster, 'roots and resources', consisted mainly of active farmers. Most of them had spent their childhood in the region and many in active farms. They valued the landscape highly and used the region either only slightly or actively for recreation. They appreciated the elements of the open agricultural landscape, and were negative toward landscape changes. The fourth group, 'committed to the landscape', had no roots in the region, neither they were socially connected to it, but they appreciated the landscape. They were mostly women who had moved into the area from urban surroundings and appreciated the open landscape elements. They particularly wished for recreational paths in fields, although they did not use the landscape that often for recreational purposes. They felt connected to the region and experienced it to be special and private. Most of the respondents' of this group did not own land, which probably affected their feelings of privacy.

Although, the landscape perceptions differed significantly between the four resident clusters, there were no significant differences in their willingness to contribute to the landscape management. However, the willingness to contribute to the management differed significantly between residents with either positive or negative general evaluative of the landscape. Thus, the sense of place affected the landscape perceptions, but only the landscape perceptions were of importance in explaining the willingness to contribute to the landscape.

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